

Danielle Steel is a descendant of the Löwenbräu beer barons. Her mother is Portuguese and her father is German. Their common language is French, although they all speak eight languages. Danielle's father's family, the prominent banking and brewing clan, has always lived in Munich and the family seat was a moated castle in Bavaria, Kaltenberg. Her mother's family were diplomats and her maternal grandfather was a Portuguese diplomat assigned to the United States for a number of years.

American-born, Danielle lived in Paris for most of her childhood. At the age of 20 she came to New York and started working for 'Supergirls', a before-its-time public relations firm run by women who organised parties for Wall Street brokerage houses and designed PR campaigns for major firms. When the recession hit, the firm went out of business and Danielle 'retired' to write her first book, *Going Home*.

Danielle has established herself as a writer of extraordinary scope. She has set her various novels all over the world, from China to New York to San Francisco, in time-frames spanning 1860 to the present. She has received critical acclaim for her elaborate plots and meticulous research, and has brought vividly to life a broad range of very different characters.

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To Thaddeus
With all my love,
And all my heart,
And all my thanks,
For all that you
Have given me

D.S.

To ride over the hills,
on a fine horse,
with a dream,
looking for love,
before sunset,
is what life is about ...
and to find it
is the culmination
of a lifetime.

1

Hurrying up the steps of the brownstone on East Sixty-third Street, Samantha squinted her eyes against the fierce wind and driving rain, which was turning rapidly into sleet. It whipped her face and tingled as it pricked at her eyes. She made a soft purring noise, as though to urge herself on, and then stopped, gasping, as she fought with the lock, her key refusing to turn. Finally, finally, the door gave, and she fell into the warmth of the front hall. For a long moment she just stood there, shaking the dampness off her long silvery blonde hair. It was a colour one rarely saw, like spun silver meshed with fine gold; a towhead they had called her as a child, and she had hated it, and then in her teens and twenties her hair had won her lavish praise. Now at thirty she was used to it, and when John told her that she looked like a fairy princess, she laughed at him, her blue eyes dancing, her beautiful, delicately angular face in sharp contrast to the full breasts and softly rounded hips. Her legs were long and thin and endless.

She was a woman of a thousand contrasts, huge dancing eyes with a sharp look that saw all, in sudden contrast to the sensual fullness of her mouth, the narrow shoulders, large breasts, the long graceful hands; the softness of her voice in contrast to the intelligent precision of her words. Somehow one expected Samantha Taylor to have a southern drawl, to languish on a velvet chaise longue, her form framed by a negligee trimmed in marabou. Instead she was given to jeans and bounded across rooms with a long stride. She was filled with energy and life, except tonight, except for the past hundred nights.

ders shook softly, and for the first time since he had spoken she felt pity slice through her like a shaft of pain. But why was she feeling sorry for him? Why? How could she feel sorry for *him* after what he had just said?

'Do you love her?' The shoulders she had loved so much only shook more, and he said nothing. But the pity began to fade now as Samantha moved toward him. Anger began to boil within her soul. 'Answer me, dammit.' She yanked hard on his shoulder, and he turned to look into her eyes.

'Yes. I think so. But, Sam, I don't know. I just know I have to get out of here for a while so I can figure it out.'

She stalked across the room, stopping only when she reached the far side of the delicate French rug that looked like a carpet of flowers beneath her bare feet. There were tiny violets and small dusky-coloured roses, and a myriad of still smaller flowers one had to stoop to see. The overall impression was one of pastel pinks and reds and mauves; it was a warm link to the soft pinks and mauves and deep dusty green on the couches and chairs that filled the large wood-panelled room. The house was an old brownstone, and the top floor was theirs. And Samantha had taken two years to decorate it, lovingly, with beautiful pieces of Louis XV furniture that she and John bought together at antique shops and auctions at Sotheby Parke Bernet. The fabrics were all French, the vases constantly filled with freshly cut flowers, the paintings all Impressionistic, and the overall feeling of the apartment was decidedly European and very elegant. Yet there was a cosy side to it too, as there was to Sam. It wasn't the beauty of the apartment she was seeing now as she stood with her back to her husband, wondering if they would ever be the same again. It was as though one of them had just died, as though everything had been instantly and irretrievably shattered and would never be repaired. And all with a few well-chosen words.

'Why didn't you tell me?' She turned and her face

God damn you, John Taylor . . . God damn you . . .’ As though she couldn’t stop herself, she rushed at him, fists flailing, and then pulling at his hair, trying to maul his face; he resisted her with ease and pulled her arms behind her as he forced her down to the floor, where he cradled her in his arms.

‘Oh, babe, I’m so sorry . . .’

‘Sorry?’ It was a shriek between laughter and tears as she struggled free. ‘You come in here and tell me that you’re leaving me for someone else and you’re “sorry”? Jesus Christ . . .’ She took a deep breath then and pushed away from him. ‘Let me go, dammit.’ She looked at him with raw pain, and when he saw that she was calmer, he let go of her arms. She was still breathless from her attack on him, but now she walked slowly to the dark green velvet couch and sat down. She looked smaller suddenly, and very young, the thick sheet of pale blonde hair hanging down as she buried her face in her hands, and then slowly she raised her face again, her eyes awash with tears. ‘Do you really love her?’ Somehow it was impossible to believe.

‘I think so.’ He nodded slowly. ‘The worst part is that I love you both.’

‘Why?’ Samantha looked past him into an empty space, seeing nothing and understanding still less. ‘What was missing between us?’

Slowly he sat down. It had to be told. She had to know. He had been wrong to keep it from her for so long. ‘It happened during the election coverage last year.’

‘And it’s been going on since then?’ Her eyes widened as she wiped away fresh tears with the back of one hand. ‘Ten months, and I didn’t know it?’ He nodded and said nothing. ‘My God.’ And then she looked at him strangely. ‘Then why now? Why did you walk in here today like this and tell me? Why don’t you stop seeing her? Why aren’t you trying to save a marriage we’ve had for more than seven years? What the hell do you mean “I’m having an affair and I’m moving out”?’

someone else? 'Will you stop seeing her, John?'

Slowly he had shaken his head. 'No, Sam, I won't.'

'Why?' Her voice had dwindled, childlike, and there had been a fresh wave of tears. 'What does she have that I don't have? She's plain, and she's boring . . . and you—you always said you didn't like her . . . and you hated working with her, and—' She couldn't go on, and he watched her, almost feeling her pain as his own.

'I have to go, Sam.'

'Why?' She grew frantic as he moved into the bedroom to pack his clothes.

'Because I do, that's all. Look, it's not fair of me to stay here and let you go on like this.'

'Please stay . . .' Panic crept into her voice like a dangerous beast. 'It's okay, we'll work it out . . . honest . . . please . . . John . . .' The tears were streaming down her face, and he suddenly turned hard and distant as he packed. He became almost frantic, as though he had to leave in a hurry before he fell apart too.

And then suddenly he turned on her. 'Stop it, dammit! Stop it . . . Sam, please . . .'

'Please what? Please don't cry because my husband is leaving me after seven years, eleven if you count the time at Yale before we were married? Or please don't make you feel guilty while you leave me for some goddamn whore? Is that what you want, John? For me to wish you luck and help you pack? Christ, you walk in here and blow my whole life apart and what do you want from me? Understanding? Well, I can't give it to you. I can't do anything except cry, and if I have to, I'll beg . . . I'll beg, do you hear me . . .?' And with that, she collapsed in a chair and began to sob again. With a firm hand he clasped the suitcase into which he had thrown half a dozen shirts, a pair of sneakers, two pairs of dress shoes, and a summer suit. Half of it was hanging out of the suitcase, and he was carrying a fistful of ties in one hand. It was impossible. He couldn't think straight, let alone pack.

ampaigns behind her to make her feel vulnerable to the winds of change. As she sat alone in her apartment all through the autumn, she remembered bits and pieces, matches of conversations, things he had said . . .

'For chrissake, Sam, you've made it to the top at thirty. Shit, with bonuses you make more money than I do.' And now she knew that that had bugged him too. But what should she have done? Quit? In her case why not work? They couldn't have a baby and John had never wanted to adopt one. 'It's not the same if it's not our own.' 'But it becomes your own. Look, we could adopt a newborn, we're young enough to qualify for the best. A baby would mean so much, sweetheart, think about it . . .' Her eyes had glowed when they had discussed it, his had always glazed, and then he would shake his head. The answer to the question of adoption was always no. And now he didn't have to worry about it anymore. In three more months he would have his first child. His own. The thought of it always hit Samantha like a physical blow.

Samantha tried not to think about it as she reached the top landing and opened her front door. The apartment had a musty smell these days. The windows were always closed, the heat was too high, her plants were all dying and she had neither thrown them out nor taken care of them. The entire apartment had an aura of unlove, of disuse, as though someone were only changing clothes there, but nothing more than that. And it was true. Samantha hadn't cooked anything more than coffee there since September. She skipped breakfast, ate lunch with clients as a rule, or with other executives of Crane, Harper, and Laub, and dinner she usually forgot. Or if she was absolutely starving, she grabbed a sandwich on the way home and ate it in the waxed paper, juggling it on one knee as she glanced at the news on TV. She hadn't seen her plates since the summer and she didn't really care. She hadn't really lived since the summer, and sometimes she wondered if she ever would again. All she could think of was what

silk blouse she'd worn to work. The boots she'd pulled off and thrown on the floor beside her were from Celine in Paris, and the scarf she unknotted at her neck was a black and white geometrical pattern from Hermès. She had worn large pearl and onyx earrings and her hair had been severely knotted at her neck. The coat, which hung damply beside her, was bright red. Even in her dazed state of loss and sorrow, Samantha Taylor was a beautiful woman, or as the creative director of the agency called her, 'a hell of a striking girl.' She turned the tap and a rush of hot water ran into the deep green tub. Once the bathroom had been filled with plants and bright flowers. In summer she liked to keep pansies and violets and geraniums there. There were tiny violets on the wallpaper, and all of the fixtures were French porcelain, in a brilliant emerald green. But like the rest of the apartment, it lacked lustre now. The cleaning woman came to keep everything from getting dusty, but it was impossible to hire someone to come three times a week to make the place looked loved. It was that that had left it, as it had left Samantha herself, that polish, that lustre that comes only with a warm touch and a kind hand, the rich patina of good loving that shows on women in a myriad tiny ways.

When the tub was full of steaming water, Samantha slipped slowly into it, let herself just lie there, and closed her eyes. For a brief moment she felt as though she were floating, as though she had no past, no future, no fears, no worries, and then little by little the present forced itself into her mind. The account she was currently working on was a disaster. It was a line of cars the agency had coveted for a decade, and now she had to come up with the whole concept herself. She had come up with a series of suggestions relating to horses, with commercials to be shot in open country or on ranches, with an outdoorsy-looking man or woman who could make a big splash in the ads. But her heart wasn't really in it, and she knew it, and she wondered briefly for how long this would go on. For how long

stairs. When he arrived in her doorway, Charles Peterson looked more like a lumberjack than the art director of Crane, Harper, and Laub, and he looked more like twenty-two than thirty-seven. He had a full, boyish face and laughing brown eyes, dark shaggy hair and a full beard, which was now dusted with sleet. 'Got a towel?' he said, catching his breath, more from the cold and the rain than from the stairs.

She rapidly got him a thick lilac towel from her bathroom and handed it to him; he took off his coat and dried his face and beard. He had been wearing a large leather cowboy hat that now funnelled a little river of ice water onto the French rug. 'Peeing on my carpet again, Charlie?'

'Now that you mention it . . . got any coffee?'

'Sure.' Sam looked at him strangely, wondering if anything was wrong. He had come to visit her once or twice before at the apartment, but usually only when something major was on his mind. 'Something happen with the new account that I should know?' She glanced out at him from the kitchen with a worried look, and he grinned and shook his head as he followed her to where she stood.

'Nope. And nothing's going to go wrong. You've been on the right track with that all week. It's going to be fabulous, Sam.'

She smiled softly as she started the coffee. 'I think so too.' The two exchanged a long, warm smile. They had been friends for almost five years, through countless campaigns, winning awards and teasing and joking and working till four A.M. to co-ordinate a presentation before showing it to the client and the account men the next day. They were both the wunderkinder of Harvey Maxwell, titular creative director of the firm. But Harvey had sat back for years now. He had found Charlie at one agency and hired Samantha from another. He knew good people when he found them. He had given them their heads and sat back with glee as he watched what they created. In another year he would



Samantha, and he had been rocked to the core by what John had done. He had never liked him anyway and had always pegged him for an egocentric ass. John's rapid desertion of Samantha and subsequent marriage to Liz Jones had proved to Charlie that he was right, as far as he was concerned at least. Melinda had tried to understand both sides, but Charlie hadn't wanted to hear it. He was too worried about Sam. She'd been in lousy shape for the past four months, and it showed. Her work had suffered. Her eyes were dead. Her face was gaunt.

'So what's doing, madame? I hope you don't mind my coming over so late.'

'No.' Samantha smiled as she poured him a cup of coffee. 'I just wonder how come you're here. Checking up on me?'

'Maybe.' His eyes were gentle above the dark beard. 'Do you mind that, Sam?'

She looked up at him sadly and he wanted to take her in his arms. 'How could I mind that? It's nice to know someone gives a damn.'

'You know I do. And so does Mellie.'

'How is she? Okay?' He nodded. They never had time to talk about things like that in the office.

'She's fine.' He was beginning to wonder how he was going to lead into what he wanted to tell her. It wasn't going to be easy, and he knew that she might not take it well.

'So? What's up?' Samantha was suddenly looking at him with amusement. He feigned an innocent expression and Samantha tweaked his beard. 'You've got something up your sleeve, Charlie. What is it?'

'What makes you say that?'

'It's pouring with rain outside, it's freezing cold, it's Friday night, and you could be at home with your warm, cosy wife and your three charming children. It's difficult to imagine that you came all the way over here just for a cup of coffee with me.'

'Why not? You're a lot more charming than my

time . . . it was . . .’ The tears began to choke her and she hurriedly stood up. ‘I’m okay, dammit. I’m fine. Why the hell—’ But Charlie grabbed her arm and pulled her back down to her seat with a gentle look in his eyes.

‘Take it easy, babe. Everything’s okay.’

‘Is he firing me, Charlie?’ A lone, sad tear crept down her cheek. But Charlie Peterson shook his head.

‘No, Sam, of course not.’

‘But?’ She knew. She already knew.

‘He wants you to go away for a while, to take it easy. You’ve given us enough to run with for a while on the Detroit account. And it won’t kill the old man to think about business for a change. We can get along without you, as long as we have to.’

‘But you don’t have to. This is silly, Charlie.’

‘Is it?’ He looked at her long and hard. ‘Is it silly, Sam? Can you really take that kind of pressure and not buckle? Watching your husband leave you for someone else, seeing him on national television every night chatting with his new wife as you watch her pregnant belly growing? Can you really take that in stride without missing a step? Without missing a goddamn day at work, for chrissake, insisting on taking on every new account in the house. I expect you to crack yourself wide open sooner or later. Can you really put yourself on the line like that, Sam? I can’t. I can’t do that to you, just as your friend. What that son of a bitch did to you almost brought you to your knees, for God’s sake. Give in to it, go cry somewhere, let go of it all and then come back. We need you. We need you desperately. Harvey knows that, I know it, the account guys know it, and you damn well better know it, but we don’t need you sick or crazy or broken and that’s how you’re going to wind up if you don’t take the pressure off now.’

‘So you think I’m having a nervous breakdown, is that it?’ She looked hurt as well as shocked, but Charlie shook his head.

‘Of course not. But hell, a year from now, you could.

'What woman?' Samantha looked blank.

'The one you told me about years ago, the one with the horse ranch, Carol or Karen something, the old woman who was the aunt of your college roommate. You used to talk about her as though she were your dearest friend.' She had been. Barbie had been her closest confidante besides John, and they had been college roommates. She had died two weeks after graduation in a plane crash over Detroit.

There was suddenly a gentle smile in Samantha's eyes. 'Barbie's aunt . . . Caroline Lord. She's a wonderful woman. But why on earth would I go there?'

'You like to ride, don't you?' She nodded. 'Well, it's a beautiful place and it's about as different and as far from Madison Avenue as you can get. Maybe what you need is to park your fancy business wardrobe and pour that sexy body of yours into some jeans and chase cowboys for a while.'

'Very funny, that's all I need.' But the idea had struck some kind of chord. She hadn't seen Caroline in years. She and John had stopped to visit her once, it had been a three-hour drive north and east from L.A. and John had hated it. He didn't like the horses, thought the ranch was uncomfortable, and Caroline and her foreman had looked askance at him for his prissy city ways. A horseman he wasn't, but Samantha was an elegant horsewoman. She had been since she was a child. There had been a wild pinto pony on the ranch when they visited and she had ridden it, to Caroline's dismay. But she hadn't got hurt in spite of the horse throwing her half a dozen times as she tried to help break him to the saddle, and John had been instantly impressed by her skill. It had been a happy time in Sam's life and seemed a long time in the past as she looked up at Charlie now. 'I'm not even sure she'd have me. I don't know, Charlie. It's a crazy idea. Why don't you guys just leave me alone to finish my work?'

'Because we love you, and you're going to destroy yourself like this.'

was she going to do with herself until April 1? April fool . . . the joke's on you . . . Europe? Australia? A visit to her mother in Atlanta? For an instant she felt freer than she ever had before. When she had left Yale, she had had John to think of, and now she had no one at all. And then, on an impulse, she reached for her address book in the darkness and decided to follow Charlie's advice. She flicked on the light and found the number easily under *L*. It would be nine thirty in California, and she hoped that it wasn't too late to call.

The phone was answered on the second ring by the familiar smoky voice of Caroline Lord. There followed a lengthy explanation on Sam's part, friendly silence from Caroline as she spoke, and then a strange, anguished sob as Sam let herself go at last. Then it was like coming home to an old friend. The older woman listened, really listened. She gave Sam a kind of comfort she had forgotten over the years. And when Sam hung up the phone half an hour later, she lay staring at the canopy above her, wondering if maybe she really was going crazy after all. She had just promised to fly to California the following afternoon.

2

It was a frenzied morning for Samantha, she packed two suitcases, called the airlines, left a note and a cheque for the cleaning woman, and attempted to close up the apartment as best she could. Then, with her two suitcases, she took a cab to the office, where she gave Charlie the key to the apartment and promised to send Christmas presents for the boys from the coast. Then she met with Harvey for more than two hours, explaining everything he wanted to know.

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and you can call me anytime you want. Does my secretary know where to find you?"

'Not yet, but she will.'

'Good.' He came around the desk then pulled her toward him without saying another word. He held her close for a long moment and then kissed the top of her head. 'Take it easy, Sam. We'll miss you.' His voice was gruff and there were tears in her eyes as she held him close for one moment and then strode rapidly toward the door. For just one tiny instant she felt as though she were being banished from her home, and she felt panic wash over her as she considered begging him not to make her leave.

But when she left his office, Charlie was waiting for her outside in the hallway, and he smiled gently at her, slung an arm over her shoulders, and gave her a squeeze. 'Ready to go, kiddo?'

'No.' She smiled damply at him and then sniffed, burrowing closely into his side.

'You will be.'

'Yeah? What makes you so sure?' They were walking slowly back to her office, and more than ever she wanted to stay. 'This is crazy. You know that, don't you, Charlie? I mean, I have work to do, campaigns to co-ordinate, I have no right to—'

'You can keep talking if you want to, Sam, but it won't make any difference.' He looked at his watch. 'Two hours from now I'm putting you on that plane.'

Samantha suddenly stopped walking and turned to look at him belligerently, and he couldn't resist smiling at her. She looked like a very beautiful and totally impossible child. 'What if I won't get on it? What if I just won't go?'

'Then I'll drug you and take you out there myself.'

'Mellie wouldn't like that.'

'She'd love it. She's been begging me to get out of her hair all week.' He stopped, cycling Samantha.

Slowly she smiled. 'I'm not going to talk you out of it, am I?'

'She does.' Charlie grinned at her.
'Then put her on it, for chrissake. Get her out of here. We have work to do.' He smiled gruffly, waved the pipe, and disappeared down another hallway as Charlie looked at her again and saw the sheepish smile.

'You don't really have to put me on the plane, you know.'

'Don't I?' She shook her head in answer, but she wasn't paying attention to the art director, she was looking at her office as though for the last time. Charlie caught her expression and grabbed her coat and bags. 'Come on, before you get maudlin on me. Let's catch that plane.'

'Yes, sir.'

He crossed the threshold and waited, and with two hesitant steps she followed him. With a deep breath and one last glance behind her she softly closed the door.

3

The plane ride across the country was uneventful. The country drifted below her like bits and pieces of a patchwork quilt. The rough brown nubby textures of winter fields drifted into snowy white velvets, and as they reached the West Coast, there were signs of deep satiny greens and rich shiny blues, as lakes and forests and fields ran beneath them. At last, with a fiery sunset to welcome them, the plane touched down in L.A.

Samantha stretched her long legs out in front of her, and then her arms as she looked out of the window once again. She had dozed most of the way across the country, and now she looked out and wondered why she had come. What point was there in running all the way

for them, you can't miss 'em, not in that airport.' And then the old woman had laughed softly, and so had Sam. In an airport filled with Vuitton and Gucci and gold lamé sandals and mink and chinchilla and little bikini tops and shirts left open to the navel, it would be easy to spot a ranch hand, in Stetson and cowboy boots and jeans. More than the costume, it would be easy to spot the way they moved and walked, the deep tan of their skin, their wholesome aura as they moved uneasily in the showily decked-out, decadent crowd. Sam already knew from her other visits to the ranch that there would be nothing decadent about the ranch hands. They were tough, kind, hardworking people who loved what they did and had an almost mystical tie to the land that they worked on, the people* they worked with, and the livestock they tended with such care. They were a breed Samantha had always respected, but certainly a very different breed than she was accustomed to in New York. For a moment, as she stood there, watching the typical airport chaos, she suddenly realised that once she got to the ranch she would be glad she had come. Maybe this was what she needed after all.

As she looked around for the sign that said BAGGAGE CLAIM, she felt a hand on her arm. She turned, looking startled, and then she saw him, the tall, broad-shouldered, leathery old cowboy that she remembered instantly from ten years before. He stood towering over her, his blue eyes like bits of summer sky, his face marked like a landscape, his smile as wide as she remembered it; a feeling of great warmth exuded from him as he touched his hat and then enfolded her into a great big bear hug. It was Bill King, the man who had been the foreman on the Lord Ranch since Caroline had bought it some thirty years before. He was a man in his early sixties, a man of slight education, but with vast knowledge, great wisdom, and even greater warmth. She had been drawn to him the first time she'd seen him, and she and Barbara had looked up to him like a wise uncle, and he had championed their every cause. He

had come with Caroline to Barbara's funeral and had stood discreetly behind the family with a floodtide of tears coursing down his face. But there were no tears now, there were only smiles for Samantha as the huge hand on her shoulder squeezed her still harder and he gave a small shout of glee.

'Damn, I'm happy to see you, Sam! How long has it been? Five, six years?'

'More like eight or nine.' She grinned up at him, equally happy to see him and suddenly delighted that she had come. Maybe Charlie hadn't been so wrong after all. The tall, weathered man looked down at her with a look that told her she had come home.

'Ready?' He crooked an arm and with a nod and a smile she took it, and they went in search of her baggage, which was already spinning lazily on the turntable when they got downstairs. 'This it?' He looked at her questioningly, holding the large black leather suitcase with the red and green Gucci stripe. He held the heavy case easily in one hand, her tote slung over his shoulder.

'That's it, Bill.'

He frowned at her briefly. 'Then you can't be meaning to stay long. I remember the last time you came out here with your husband. You must have had seven bags between the two of you.'

She chuckled at the memory. John had brought enough clothes with him for a month at Saint-Moritz. 'Most of that was my husband's. We had just been to Palm Springs.'

He nodded, saying nothing, and then led the way to the garage. He was a man of few words but rich emotions. She had seen that often during her early visits to the ranch. Five minutes later they had reached the large red pickup, stowed her suitcase in the back, and were driving slowly out of the parking lot of the Los Angeles International Airport, and Sam, with a flick

marriage, and now the confusion of bodies pressing around her on the plane and then in the airport terminal after the trip, finally she was about to go out to open places, to be alone, to think, to see mountains and trees and cattle, and to rediscover a life she had almost forgotten. As she thought of it, a long, slow smile lit up her face.

'You look good, Sam.' He cast an eye at her as they left the airport, and he shifted into fourth gear as they reached the freeway beyond.

But she only smiled and shook her head at him. 'Not as good as all that. It's been a long time.' Her voice softened on the words, remembering the last time she had seen him and Caroline Lord. It had been a strange trip, an awkward mingling of past and present. The ranch hadn't been much fun for John. And as they drove along the highway, Sam's mind filled with memories of the last trip. It seemed a thousand years later when she felt the old foreman's hand on her arm, and when she looked around, she realised that the countryside around them had altered radically. There was no evidence of the plastic ugliness of the L.A. suburbs, in fact there were no houses in sight at all, only acres and acres of rolling farmland, the far reaches of large ranches, and uninhabited government preserves. It was beautiful country all around her, and Sam rolled down the window and sniffed the air. 'God, it even smells different, doesn't it?'

'Sure does.' He smiled the familiar warm smile and drove on for a while without speaking. 'Caroline sure is looking forward to seeing you, Sam. It's been kind of lonely for her ever since Barb died. You know, she talks about you a heck of a lot. I always wondered if you'd come back. I didn't really think so after the last time.' They had left the ranch early, and John had made no secret of the fact that he'd been bored stiff.

'I would have come back, sooner or later. I was always hoping to stop here when I went to L.A. on

'And now? You quit your job, Sam?' He had only a vague idea that she had something to do with commercials, but he had no clear picture of what, and he didn't really care. Caroline had told him that it was a good job, it made her happy, and that was all that counted. He knew what her husband did, of course. Everyone in the country knew John Taylor, by face as well as by name. Bill King had never liked him, but he sure as hell knew who he was.

'No, Bill, I didn't quit. I'm on leave.'

'Sick leave?' He looked worried as they drove through the hills.

Sam hesitated for only a moment. 'Not really. Kind of a rest cure, I guess.' For a minute she was going to leave it at that and then she decided to tell him. 'John and I split up.' He raised a questioning eyebrow but said nothing, and she went on. 'Quite a while ago actually. At least it seems like it. It's been three or four months.' A hundred and two days, to be exact. She had counted every one of them. 'And I guess they just thought I needed the break at the office.' It sounded lousy to her as she said it, and suddenly she felt panic rise in her as it had that morning when she spoke to Harvey. Were they really firing her and just didn't want to tell her yet? Did they think she'd already cracked up? But when she looked at Bill King, she saw that he was nodding, as though it all made perfect sense to him.

'Sounds right to me, babe.' His voice was reassuring. 'It's damn hard to keep on going when you hurt.' He stopped for a moment and then went on. 'I found that out years ago when my wife died. I thought I could still handle my job on the ranch I was working on then. But after a week my boss said, "Bill, my boy, I'm givin' you a month's money, you go on home to your folks and come back when the money's gone." You know, Sam, I was mad as fire when he did it, thought he was telling me that I couldn't handle the job, but he was right. I went to my sister's outside Phoenix, stayed for about six weeks, and when I came back, I was myself again. You

can't expect a man nor a woman to keep going all the time. Sometimes you have to give him room for his grief.'

He didn't tell her that he had taken three months off twenty-five years later, time off from the Lord ranch, when his son was killed during the early days of Vietnam. For three months he had been so stricken that he had barely been able to talk. It was Caroline who had nursed him out of it, who had listened, who had cared, who had finally come to find him in a bar in Tucson and dragged him home. He had a job to do on the ranch, she had told him, and enough was enough. She barked at him like a drill sergeant and heaped work on him until he thought he would die. She had shouted, yelled, argued, bullied, until finally one day they had almost come to blows out in the south pasture. They had got off their horses, and she had swung at him, and he had knocked her right on her ass, and then suddenly she had been laughing at him, and she laughed until the tears ran from her eyes in streams, and he laughed just as hard and knelt beside her to help her up, and it was then that he had kissed her for the first time.

It had been eighteen years ago that August, and he had never loved another woman as he loved her. She was the only woman he had actually ached for, longed for, lusted after, laughed with, worked with, dreamed with, and respected more than he respected any man. But she was a very special kind of woman. Caroline Lord was no ordinary woman. She was a superwoman. She was brilliant and amusing, attractive, kind, compassionate, intelligent. And he had never been able to understand what she wanted with a ranch hand. But she had known her mind from the beginning and never regretted the decision. For almost twenty years now she had secretly been his woman. And she would have made the affair public long before, had he let her. But he felt that her position as mistress of the Lord Ranch was sacred, and although here and there it was suspected, no one had ever known for certain that they

were lovers, the only thing anyone knew for certain was that they were friends. Even Samantha had never been sure that there was more between them, though she and Barbara had suspected and often giggled, but they had never really known.

'How's Caroline, Bill?' She looked over at him with a warm smile and saw a special glow come to his eyes.

'Tough as ever. She's tougher than anyone on that ranch.' And older. She was three years older than he. She had been one of the most glamorous and elegant women in Hollywood in her twenties, married to one of the most important directors of her day. The parties they had given were still among the early legends, and the home they had built in the hills above Hollywood was still on some of the tours. It had changed hands often but was still a remarkable edifice, a monument to a bygone era rarely equalled in later years. But at thirty-two Caroline Lord had been widowed, and after that, for her, life in Hollywood had never been the same again. She had stayed on for two more years, but they had been painful and lonely, and then suddenly without explanation she had disappeared. She had spent a year in Europe, and then another six months in New York. It took her another year after that to decide what she really wanted, but as she drove for hours, alone in her white Lincoln Continental, she suddenly knew where it was she longed to be. Out in the country, in nature, away from the champagne and the parties and the pretence. None of it had had any meaning for her after her husband was gone. All of that was over for her now. She was ready for something very different, a whole new life, a new adventure, and that spring, after looking at every available piece of property in a two-hundred mile radius of Los Angeles, she bought the ranch.

She paid a fortune for it, hired an advisor and the best ranch hands around. She paid everyone a handsome wage, built them pleasant, cosy quarters, and offered them a kind of warmth and comfort that few men could deny. And in return, she wanted sound

surprised no one, since her father, Ethan, owned a movie studio, and her mother, Estelle — a secret dealer in the privacy of her Bel Air mansion — was the high priestess of L.A. society.

Sitting next to Cheryl was Grant Lennon, Junior, the dissolute son of Grant Lennon, a wildly attractive movie icon. Grant, who worked as a junior agent at International Artists Agents, considered himself the town cocksmen, but Jordanna suspected that unlike his studly father he couldn't get it up as often as he would like, which was why he kept trying so hard.

Then there was Marjory Sanderson, the dreamy-eyed daughter of a billionaire television magnate. Marjory was painfully thin, with long wispy fair hair and a plain pinched face. She was a recovering anorexic, spending her afternoons on her psychiatrist's couch.

And lastly Shep Worth, the o symbol. Shep resembled a small mother, Taurean Worth — the won quit, and a long line of ex-husband

The group had grown up together of too much too soon. A Porsche credit cards. European vacations hottest restaurants. And endless law

Jordanna flopped into a chair, grabbing a handful of tortilla chips mouth.

'Tough day?' Cheryl asked.

'It's a bitch doing nothing,' Jordanna said.

Cheryl laughed a humourless laugh said drily, knowing exactly what Jordanna was saying.

Cheryl had moved out of the family mansion because of the envy of her friends because her father had bought her a new house with a condo in Westwood, a new car, credit cards. They were almost as delighted to depart the family mansion. She was trying to get her life together with

surprised no one, since her father, Ethan, owned a major studio, and her mother, Estelle – a secret drinker in the privacy of her Bel Air mansion – was the high priestess of LA society.

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And lastly Shep Worth, the only son of an ageing sex symbol. Shep resembled a smaller version of his famous mother, Taureen Worth – the woman with a body that never quit, and a long line of ex-husbands.

The group had grown up together, sharing the experience of too much too soon. A Porsche at sixteen. Handfuls of credit cards. European vacations. The best tables in the hottest restaurants. And endless lavish parties.

Jordanna flopped into a chair. 'I need a drink,' she said, grabbing a handful of tortilla chips and tossing them into her mouth.

'Tough day?' Cheryl asked.

'It's a bitch doing nothing,' Jordanna deadpanned.

Cheryl laughed a humourless laugh. 'Tell me about it,' she said drily, knowing exactly what Jordanna meant.

Cheryl had moved out of the family home at seventeen, the envy of her friends because her parents had presented her with a condo in Westwood, a new BMW, and limitless charge cards. They were almost as delighted to see her go as she was to depart the family mansion. Since that time she'd been trying to get her life together without much success. There

'C'mon, Jordanna, get real,' Grant said, preparing for conquest. 'I'd like to get an ear on *your* pillow talk.'

'Screw you, Grant,' she said mildly.

Shep joined in. He had sun-kissed blond hair and small, well-defined features. 'Yes, Jordy,' he said accusingly, 'you do the same as Grant - pick a body for the night and a couple of hours later it's goodbye, don't call me I'll call you.'

'At least mine don't have plastic tits,' Jordanna retorted tartly. 'And they don't show everything in girly magazines with one leg in the air claiming they love animals and have this burning desire to save the world.'

'Personally, I've decided I'm into celibacy,' Cheryl announced. 'Either that or I might try the dyke route. This whole AIDS thing scares me enough to keep my pants *on*!'

'Can I watch?' Grant asked, leering.

'Get *out* of here,' Cheryl said tartly. 'You're a real sicko.'

Grant touched her shoulder. 'And you love it.'

'In your dreams.'

Grant moved rapidly toward Miss Tank Top, who lurked at the crowded bar with a group of similar-looking girlfriends.

'God, I hope he's not going to bring her over,' Jordanna groaned.

'Ignore her, she'll never notice,' Cheryl said, knocking back her fourth margarita. 'She's the kind of girl who only pays attention to the guys.'

'I can't stand these would-be starlets,' Jordanna complained. 'They honestly believe if they sleep with a guy who's even vaguely connected to the movie industry he'll give them a part. Everyone knows what part they'll get, and the only place it's connected to is his balls!'

'Vulgar!' Shep said.

'But true,' Cheryl said.

'They're so dumb!' Jordanna said.

'Not everyone has your rocket scientist IQ,' Shep interjected.

Jordanna turned on him. 'Why are *you* so pissy tonight? Got your period?'

they tell you, men are *not* into condoms; they figure it slows down their action.'

'I hope you're not telling me *you* let them get away with that crap,' Cheryl said sternly.

'Do I look like an idiot?' Jordanna replied, brushing back her long dark hair. 'I buy them by the gross and keep them in a cookie jar on the coffee table. They soon get the hint, and if they don't they're out the door.'

Oh yeah? Who was she kidding? Twice the previous month she'd indulged in unprotected sex because she'd been too out of her head to care. Every so often she found herself on a self-destruct course. Drinks, drugs, wild sex, anonymous partners. When she came to her senses she swore she'd never do it again. And yet something always happened that pushed her over the edge.

Wife number five was responsible for her last binge. Gotta get over caring so much about Daddy. He obviously didn't give a damn about her.

The truth was she knew she had to gain control of her emotions and stop feeling that way. If she didn't get it together nobody was going to do it for her. Right now she was off drugs. No grass. No cocaine. No crazed nights. She was cleaning up her act and it felt good.

'I had another death threat,' Marjory said, speaking for the first time in an hour.

Jordanna leaned forward. 'A *what*?'

'I've been getting these letters,' Marjory confessed.

'What kind of letters?' Cheryl asked.

Marjory clammed up. 'I don't want to talk about it.'

'The hell you don't,' Cheryl said, signalling the pretty waitress to bring her another drink.

Marjory's voice was low and even. 'He says he's going to slit my throat.'

'For God's sake!' exclaimed Jordanna. 'Have you contacted the FBI?'

Marjory looked mournful. 'I haven't told *anyone*.'

'Not even your father?' Shep questioned.

'He's too busy,' Marjory said.

'Give it a rest, you two,' Cheryl said, yawning. 'You're beginning to sound like you're married.'

Jordanna leaped to her feet. 'That's it. I'm out of here,' she said restlessly.

'Where are you going?' Arnie asked, disappointed.

'To check out the competition.'

'We have no competition,' he boasted.

'I'll let you know,' she said crisply.

On her way to the door she caught a wink from a stoned Charlie Dollar. He was old enough to be her father but still quite sexy. Idly she wondered what he was like in bed – reports varied.

Out in the parking lot her Porsche was parked right up front. She was a good tipper – learned that from Daddy. 'So you give out an extra thousand bucks a year, it's worth it.' Words of wisdom from the great Jordan Levitt. And he *was* great, when he wanted to be. When he had time. When whoever the current wife was wasn't messing with his brain. Strike that. Make it cock. Fact of life. Jordan Levitt was ruled by the great erection.

Growing up in Hollywood. Watching Daddy get laid. What an education!

Jordanna had many fine memories, one of the most vivid being the time she'd discovered her father in the family swimming pool – which happened to be drained at the time – servicing a voluptuous movie star, while their respective spouses circulated at a lavish party taking place inside the house. Jordanna had viewed the entire spectacle from her bedroom window. She'd never told anyone – except Jamie – that it was she who'd switched the floodlights on the pool, illuminating her father's bare ass and the movie star's huge quivering breasts. Wife number three had departed shortly after. Jordanna was satisfied. Mission accomplished.

She hit the road in her Porsche and dropped by a couple of supposedly happening clubs. Unfortunately, Arnie was right – Homebase Central was the only place to hang, there was no action elsewhere.

CHAPTER SIX



Five days on Quincy and Amber's couch was five days too many. Michael had an aching back and a permanent headache because the baby never stopped crying and the toddler kept up a particularly aggravating whine from early morning on.

'How do you put up with this?' he said to Quincy as they drove slowly through the residential streets of Beverly Hills - Quincy was giving him the grand tour.

'It's called marriage, doncha remember?' Quincy said, chuckling.

Yeah, he remembered all right. Rita complaining every time Bella woke her in the middle of the night. The smell of dirty diapers. Toys and baby clothes all over the floor. A fridge full of formula. Ah, memories . . .

'I gotta get my ass outta your back yard,' he muttered, thinking to himself the sooner the better. He'd already looked at several apartments. Unfortunately the ones he liked were too expensive, and the rest were crap.

'Why?' Quincy asked. 'Amber loves you, an' I kinda get off on havin' you around. It's like old times, only we're not out bustin' our cans chasin' low-life scumbags.'

'True,' he said, staring through the window at huge wrought-iron gates, sweeping lawns, exotic plants and manicured palm trees. 'Hey, Q, this place is unreal. People really live like this?'

Quincy laughed. He was a big man, verging on being overweight, with soft brown eyes, bushy hair, and extra-large



'Whyn't you bring her over to us? Amber would love it, she's turned into a regular earth mother.'

'I'm tempted.'

'Tell you what,' Quincy said, making a quick decision. 'If you promise not to tell Amber on account of the fact that she's startin' to call me fat boy, I'll buy us a pizza, then we'll drop by an' surprise Rita. How's that?'

'You know something,' Michael said, nodding slowly, 'that's not such a bad idea.'



'Bobby Rush,' Mason said, his voice crackling over the phone from New York.

'Don't you mean *Jerry* Rush?' Kennedy replied, cradling the receiver under her chin as she reached for a notepad and pen.

'Jerry's cold. Bobby's hot.'

She hated asking, but she honestly didn't know. 'Who is Bobby Rush?'

Mason grunted disapprovingly. 'Sometimes you surprise me.'

'I've never heard of him.'

'For Christ's sake, K.C., keep up with what's happening or I'm likely to think I've made a serious mistake hiring you.'

She drew a stick figure on the notepad and added little pointed horns. 'Movie stars are not my priority, Mason. I presume that's what he is.'

'He's Jerry's son done good. Starred in and produced *Hard Tears*, it just passed the hundred-million-dollar mark. He takes his clothes off on screen — that should appeal to you — a touch of the double standard reversed. I suggest you see the movie. In the meantime we'll Fed Ex you some of his clippings and a bio.'

'How exciting,' she said drily.

'I want a very provocative piece. This'll be the cover story. Make him out to be a male-Sharon Stone.'

An hour later she was sitting in a darkened theatre watching Bobby Rush emote. He was certainly movie-star material with his regular features, dirty blond hair and incredible blue eyes. The body was good, too – and he flashed regularly – kind of like a Richard Gere for the nineties. At one point in the movie there was a brief full frontal shot – fast but worthwhile.

Male bimbo? she jotted down with a question mark. Beautiful but dumb? If he was, she could rip him to shreds without any trouble at all.

Now why would I want to do that? she asked herself.

Because I have no intention of writing the usual love-struck female journalist puff piece.

She called Mason. 'Send me everything you've got on him and the father.'

'This is not supposed to be a father/son piece,' Mason warned. 'His press people were adamant about that.' A pause. 'But do what you want – make it provocative.'

'I intend to.'



The Sunset View Hollywood apartments did not live up to their glamorous name. There was no sunset because they faced the wrong way, and absolutely no view. The small cluster of run-down apartments were located in a seedy side-street off Hollywood Boulevard.

'Shit!' Michael muttered, as Quincy parked his car outside. 'Rita told me she and Bella were living in a decent place. This is a crap hole.'

'Maybe it's better on the inside,' Quincy said, always the optimist.

'Maybe not,' Michael said grimly, eyeing a couple of derelicts huddled in a doorway surrounded by overflowing shopping carts.

'Let's go take a look,' Quincy suggested.

They got out of the car, dodging a drunken bum who staggered by singing to himself

Quincy pulled a face. 'That's breakin' an' enterin', Mike. You know Rita's temper. I don't wanna be here when it hits.'

Michael threw him a dirty look. 'What happened to you in California, Q? You gone soft?'

'Hey, hey,' Quincy replied, gesturing wildly. 'Gotta keep within the confines of the law or I could get my licence revoked.'

'Fuck the law and fuck your licence. I want in.'

'Shit!' Quincy groaned. 'I almost forgot what a trip it was workin' with you.'

'Let's go,' Michael said impatiently, clicking his fingers.

'Shit!' Quincy repeated, before using his skills and a Sears credit card to skewer open Rita's front door.

The first thing that hit them was the smell – a combination of stale air, mouldy food and damp. 'Jesus!' Michael said grimly, pushing his way in. 'What's that stink?'

Piled on the floor behind the door was a stack of unopened brochures, letters and flyers – mostly junk mail, but as Michael bent to sift through it he was startled to find his last two months' alimony cheques, still in their envelopes.

'Sorry to say it,' Quincy said, walking through the musty hallway. 'I gotta strong suspicion they don't live here any more.'

'I see.'

Cheryl desperately wanted Jordanna to understand that this was a legitimate business venture she could get into without any help from Daddy. She needed to separate from her family, show the world she had her own identity. 'The thing is she's got the high-class hooker bit covered because important men trust her. Donna's connected – like me. That's why she's decided I'm the perfect person to take over for her.'

'Lucky you.'

Cheryl chose to ignore the sarcasm in Jordanna's voice. 'You see, guys are all the same,' she explained, warming to her subject. 'They either have the original wife who's not into sex any more. Or the sleek little trophy number who, after one year of marriage, conveniently forgets what a blow job is! Sex and marriage do not jell – hence Donna's thriving venture. These men are *into* paying for it.'

'Why?' Jordanna asked, genuinely puzzled.

'For the same reason they buy the most expensive cars, houses, clothes. Money equals status. They don't want a fifty-bucks-a-night hooker, they want the top-of-the-line latest model, hardly used, *very* costly.'

'You've finally lost it, Cheryl,' Jordanna said, shaking her head. 'Why would *you* get involved?'

'For a piece of the action.'

'Oh, like you're hard up for money. Your father owns a studio, for God's sake, you can have anything you want.'

Cheryl turned on her, eyes flashing. 'I want to do something on my own for once without taking hand-outs from my family. Right now my only claim to fame is that I went on a date with Eric Menendez in high school. This is my opportunity.'

Jordanna snorted derisively. 'Big fucking opportunity. Running call girls.'

'Don't knock it,' Cheryl said defensively. 'They pull in fifteen hundred a trick, and I get to pocket forty per cent. Of course, I'll have to put aside ten for Donna, but *that's* OK. I'll still end up with plenty.'

She'd considered several other careers, but none had really grabbed her attention, so eventually, like Cheryl, she'd fallen into the pattern of lunching with friends, shopping, hanging out, going to parties, doing drugs. It soon became an addictive lifestyle, although it never made her happy, and it certainly didn't make her father happy. The summer after Fran committed suicide he'd gotten together with Ethan Landers, and the two men had decided their errant daughters needed something more than parties to occupy their vacation time, so they'd put them to work as set assistants on *The Contract*, a movie Jordan was producing for Ethan's studio. Both she and Cheryl had hated every minute of it, although Jordanna had managed to have an affair with the director, Mac Brooks, and that had been quite an experience.

Now she was well aware she was at a crossroads, but she sure as hell wasn't becoming a madam like Cheryl, who was even now leaning over her cappuccino with a self-satisfied expression. 'I've had a brilliant idea,' Cheryl exclaimed excitedly.

'What?' Jordanna asked, suspicious of her friend's brilliant ideas.

'You!' Cheryl said, eyes gleaming. 'You'd make a shitload of money.'

'Doing what?'

'You could be one of my girls.'

'I *love* your insane sense of humour. Any more brilliant ideas?'

'I mean it.'

'Stop it, Cheryl, OK? I have no intention of becoming one of your girls. In fact, there's no way I'm getting involved in this stupid scam of yours.'

'You'll be sorry,' Cheryl taunted. 'Donna handed over her little black book and it's full of important names - aren't you at least curious?'

'Nope.'

'Her book's worth plenty and I've got it,' Cheryl said.

'How fortunate for you,' Jordanna replied with absolutely no interest.

'You'd *love* being a hooker,' Cheryl continued, still trying. Think of the illicit thrill!

Jordanna shook her head. 'I've never seen you this typed.'

'Keep watching,' Cheryl said happily. 'I'm about to be bigger than my daddy any day!'



Sharleen and Mac were on the outs, they'd hardly spoken for almost a week now, ever since they'd arrived home from the screening at Jordan Levitt's and found the police on their doorstep.

Sharleen blamed Mac's two sons for the trouble. Mac was equally convinced that Sharleen's sixteen-year-old daughter was to blame. Whichever of their offspring was responsible did not make much difference – the fact was there'd been a drug bust in their house and Sharleen was mortified. 'I'll be all over the tabloids,' she wailed.

'It won't be the first time,' Mac replied, remembering when she'd been labelled the other woman in his very public divorce. At the time he'd been married to Willa, the daughter of famous director William Davidoss. Willa had been his ticket to the big time – he'd started out as third assistant on one of her father's movies in New York, and ended up moving to California and marrying his daughter. Two years later – with a little help from William – he'd directed his first movie.

When he and Willa had separated, the tabloids had gone into a frenzy, because some big mouth had alerted them about his affair with Sharleen. For months they'd lived with the lurid headlines, right up until he'd divorced Willa and married Sharleen. Thank God they hadn't delved into his background, although it would be pretty difficult to find out anything about him, he'd covered his tracks well.

Sharleen was not to be appeased. 'That was then – this is now. I have a reputation to protect,' she said primly.

When Sharleen said things like that, he wasn't quite sure

Sharleen, who went to great lengths to inform anyone who'd listen that they were merely her stepsons.

Mac was not happy about the situation. Getting divorced was one thing. But getting divorced and then having his ex set up home with another woman was downright insulting. Especially when *he* was paying for their cozy little set-up. Somehow he imagined Willa's sexual turnaround reflected on him, and not favourably. Hadn't he satisfied her? Wasn't he an incredible lover as women had always told him?

'Baby, you're the best,' Sharleen crooned on a regular basis. She was a very intelligent woman when she wanted to be.

So Kyle and Daniel were banished to Hawaii, and Suzy was forbidden to see her angelic-faced girlfriend ever again. Case settled. Mac could get back to concentrating on his next project.

He had a lunch-time meeting with Bobby Rush regarding a script Bobby had sent him. *Thriller Eyes* was an interesting piece of material – a psychological sexual edge-of-the-seat psycho drama about a hero and a villain. The twist was that the villain was a beautiful psychotic young woman, although the audience didn't find out until the end of the movie.

Mac liked the piece a lot, but he wasn't sure about working with Bobby Rush, if he was anything like his father he'd be a monumental pain in the ass.



'Have you heard about Cheryl's latest venture?' Jordanna asked Shep as they sat on the patio of his two-bedroom Hollywood Hills house – purchased for him by his mother in a generous mood.

'The call-girl thing?' Shep said.

Jordanna raised her eyebrows. 'Is she crazy or what?'

'We all know she's crazy,' Shep stated matter-of-factly.

'I realize that,' Jordanna replied. 'But this time she's *really* over the edge.'

'Poor Taureen - '

'Her husbands get younger, she gets older, and the movie roles are almost non-existent.'

'It's so sad.'

'Right now she's doing the nasty with an ex-bartender who thinks he's this generation's answer to James Dean.'

'How old is he?'

'Barely older than me.'

'Well . . . if it makes her happy.' She sipped her tea. 'How's *your* relationship with her now?'

'After ten years of therapy I'm learning to accept her for who she is.'

'And does she accept you?'

Shep turned away, not answering.

Jordanna knew better than to push. Parents. Who could understand them? Who really wanted to? She'd spent years in and out of shrinkdom until she'd finally decided she didn't need help, she could deal with her own problems.

Am I doing that? she thought anxiously.

Yes, she decided, I'm finally making a start.

☆ ☆ ☆

Bobby Rush sat at table number seven in Le Dome surveying the scene. It was a good day - a power day. He'd already had a stream of people stop by his table as he waited for Mac Brooks to arrive. Something told him *he* was the movie star, he shouldn't be kept waiting. But so what? His ego wasn't out of control yet, he could handle it.

'Bobby!' Taureen Worth paused dramatically on her way to the back room, trailed by two short, hyper agents. For a woman in her early fifties she was quite a knockout in a skin-tight white Montana suit and Walter Steiger stiletto heels.

Bobby jumped up and returned her enthusiastic greeting, even though the last time they'd met he'd had two lines in one of her movies and she'd barely acknowledged his existence. 'You look wonderful,' he said, with just the right degree of sincerity. He'd learned at an early age that in Hollywood

you always complimented women and they always believed you whether you meant it or not.

'I feel like a hag!' Taureen replied, knowing full well that she did indeed look wonderful. And so she should, she worked hard enough at it – liposuction, face peels, collagen injections, high colonics, punishing work-outs. She hadn't resorted to plastic surgery – yet. 'I've been working non-stop, you know how tiring *that* is.'

Bobby nodded, wondering what she was working on.

'I'm so *proud* of you!' Taureen exclaimed, flashing her feral smile – big teeth and a curled scarlet lip. 'To think, I discovered you!'

What was the woman talking about?

'Now, Bobby,' she said, leaning over his table, bending slightly so he couldn't miss her impressive trademark cleavage. 'When you're casting your next movie don't forget it was *me* who gave you your first break. I'd love us to work together again.'

He repeated his nod, it seemed that's all she required. He was saved by the two agents bobbing into view. Taureen did not introduce them. She pursed her lips and moved in for the kill, leaving sticky lip gloss residue on both his cheeks. 'Goodbye, darling.' Meaningful pause. 'You're looking very . . . sexy.'

It's the hit movie that does it, he wanted to say, pulls 'em in every time.

Taureen swept into the other room, her musky scent lingering behind.

What a town! Bobby thought. When you're hot you're boiling. And when you're cold – lie down and die, asshole, 'cause even your exterminator won't speak to you.

Mac Brooks hurried up to the table full of apologies. 'Trouble with my kids,' he said ruefully. 'If you're single, Bobby, stay that way. Marriage leads to kids, and then normal life as you know it is over for ever. I gotta have a drink.' He wrinkled his nose. 'That's a hell of an aftershave you're wearing.'

'Taureen Worth'

'Is she doing that Elizabeth Taylor thing now?'

Bobby laughed. 'Not yet. She stopped by the table. I'm sure she'll be back when she knows you're here.'

'You heard about me and Tanreen, huh? It was a location fuck – you know what that's like – six weeks of passion and then you don't even remember each other's name. She's the worst actress I ever worked with – never again.'

Bobby decided to go the polite route. 'It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mac. I admire every one of your movies, especially *The Contract*.'

Mac signalled the waiter, he really did need a drink and a Scotch on the rocks would do nicely. 'You, too, Bobby. I had the studio screen *Hard Tears* for me – excellent work. As an actor you make interesting choices. You have an edge. I like that, keeps the audience alert.'

Bobby felt suitably flattered. 'Thanks,' he said modestly.

'I almost worked with your father once.'

'How lucky can you get.'

Well, Mac thought, I guess we know where we stand on *that* issue.

'So,' Bobby said, getting right to it. 'Did you have time to read the script?'

'Read it. Loved it. That's why I'm here.'

'Are you interested?'

Mac chuckled. 'You don't believe in wasting time, do you?'

Bobby paused before answering. He'd gone over this meeting in his head for several days. Mac Brooks had a fine track record, but he hadn't made a money-making movie in several years, so choosing him for the project was a risk. However, Bobby was sure, in fact he knew that if they got along, Mac would be the perfect director for his film.

'You know what, Mac,' he said slowly, *measuring his words*. 'In the past I *have* wasted a lot of time, and now I'm taking the high-ticket ride.' He stared directly at the *Oscar*-winning director, his blue eyes blazingly intense. 'I need a fast answer, so, let's cut out the bullshit. Are you in or out?'

'What does Michael say?'

'What *can* he say? Right now he's trying to reach her aunt in New York. She's Rita's only relative. He's hopin' she knows where they are.'

'I'm telling you, check her make-up,' Amber said, nodding wisely. 'No woman goes anywhere for more than a day without taking her make-up.'

'Yeah, yeah, we'll do that. We're goin' back to the apartment an' meeting a couple of cops I know. I'm gonna try an' get 'em to put out a missing persons report.'

Michael slammed the phone down and marched into the kitchen. 'I need a drink,' he said, grim-faced.

'That's exactly what you don't need,' Quincy said, remembering the bad times.

Michael managed a wry laugh. 'I said I *needed* one, I didn't say I was going to have one.' Opening the fridge he grabbed a 7-Up and took a hearty swig. 'There's no reply at her aunt's house.'

'I have a feeling they're both fine,' Amber said reassuringly.

Oh yeah, like she would know, Michael thought. If anything had happened to his kid . . .

No. It didn't bear thinking about. He would kill if anyone harmed Bella – blow their fucking brains out without a second thought.

Guilt was creeping up on him big time. He should have guessed something was wrong when he kept on getting the answering machine. He was a detective for chrissakes, the moment he hit LA he should have run right over there instead of waiting almost a week.

Taking two more gulps of 7-Up he slammed the can on the counter. 'Come on, Q, let's get back, I wanna talk to the woman in the upstairs apartment again. Maybe she's remembered something.'

Stopping only to kiss Amber on the cheek, Quincy was right behind him. 'We're on our way. See you later, hon.'

trated effort to keep his voice calm, because he knew ~~exactly~~ what she was alluding to. 'One a night? Two?'

'Hey, now, Mike, don't go thinking just because —' Quincy began.

Michael silenced him with a look.

Lily squinted, thinking about it for a moment. 'First there was several different ones comin' an' goin' all times of the day an' night,' she said, fidgiting with the bow in her hair. 'Then there was just one. He visited her regular for a couple of weeks, until one night he came an' got her an' they took off. I ain't seen her since.'

'Was her little girl with her, Lily?' Michael asked softly.

'Maybe she was.'

'What the fuck do you mean, *maybe* she was,' Michael yelled, suddenly losing it. 'Was she or wasn't she?'

'OK, OK,' Quincy said, hurriedly getting between them as Lily cowed back. 'Let's take it nice an' easy here. Lily's doing her best to remember, aren't you, sweetheart?'

Lily was shaken. Jerking a cheaply bejewelled finger at Michael she said, 'What's the matter with *him*?'

'It's *his* kid, Lily,' Quincy explained. 'You can understand him being upset, can't you?'

'You *sure* he's a cop?' Lily asked, peering at Michael suspiciously.

'Just as much as I am,' Quincy lied smoothly. 'Now come on, Lily, let's try an' jog that memory of yours.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Poring over Bobby Rush's clipping file, Kennedy soon reached the conclusion he was a driven workaholic mightily striving to overcome the handicap of having a famous father. One of the things she took note of was that every time Jerry Rush's name came up Bobby went on automatic response. Exactly the same answers kept on appearing.

My father is a wonderful actor.

We're very different.

'Rosa -'

Too late, Rosa was long gone. Oh, God! Why had she agreed to go?

Just lonely I guess.

Lonely, ha! She was never lonely. She loved spending time by herself taking long walks on the beach, reading, driving along the Pacific Coast Highway in her 1986 Corvette. In fact she didn't even mind dining alone in a restaurant - something most people wouldn't consider under any circumstances.

Oh well, dinner at eight and out.

She called Bobby Rush's publicist. The magazine had already set the interview. Elspeth, his publicist, had set the ground rules. Now all she had to do was arrange a time and a place.

Elspeth spoke in short sharp bursts. 'Breakfast. The Four Seasons. Friday. He can only spare an hour.'

'No,' Kennedy replied pleasantly. 'This is a major piece - a cover story. I need to spend a day with him. A couple of hours for the interview and the rest of the time I'll follow him around and blend into the background.'

'It won't fly,' Elspeth said snappishly.

'I think you'll find it will,' Kennedy replied, remaining calm. 'I'm sure we all have the same goal in mind - plenty of overage for your client, and I can't do that unless I spend time with him. Call me back.'

Click. She was gone before the woman could argue.



Ferdy's friend, Nix, was six feet four inches of sinewy chocolate-coloured muscle. He had tight curly hair, puppy-dog eyes and a sweet smile. He spoke eloquently and intelligently. He was polite and charming. They had a terrific evening with Rosa and Ferdy, and when dinner was over Nix overruled Ferdy's objections and picked up the cheque. Kennedy was impressed. Even more so when he insisted on following her home in his rented car to be sure she made it safely.

THANKS FOR A MEMORABLE TIME TO BE
NEXT TIME?

She couldn't help smiling. A moment later
both of them. But no, there would be no
ances. It was a one-nighter, nothing more.

Fifteen minutes and a long wait
Bobby Rush's publicist.

'Friday,' Elspeth said, something about
meet at his office at the studio at ten.

'And do I get to spend the day?

'He's very busy, but if you can
background...'

'Once I've done the interview, I'll be
there.'

Sure, lady. Believe that.



Man rented a black car under an assumed name. Nothing
Nothing memorable. Just a plain black Ford that allowed
complete anonymity.
He stopped by Sears and paid cash for a pair of black slacks, a
sleeved dark shirt and black running shoes. He needed shades,
vanity got the best of him - unable to settle for Sears
glasses, he ended up buying expensive black-out Armani shades
the Fred Segal store in Santa Monica.
When he got home and was safely locked in his room he tried
his new outfit on and was satisfied.

Since leaving prison his hair was getting longer. Carefully he
licked it back with gel, securing it with a rubber band. Then he
stared at himself in the mirror for a long time, striking karate
poses, taking his shades off and putting them on again several
times, deciding that he bore more than a passing resemblance
to his film idol - Steven Seagal. He'd watched all of Steven
Seagal's movies over and over in prison, especially the one about
revengeance.

Steven Seagal was a man who understood about getting even.
Steven Seagal was someone to admire.

Not that The Man was into admiring people. It was weak to
hero worship. Better to hate everyone and then there was no way
anyone could ever get to you. He'd learned that important piece of
information at a very early age. Unfortunately he hadn't always
listened to his own counsel.

The Girl had been his downfall. The pretty Girl with the long

silky yellow hair and the cornflower-blue eyes and the quirky little come-on smile.

The Girl had led him on. She'd encouraged him and tempted him in the thin see-through dresses she wore, her small tits beckoning him like beacons. She'd smiled and flirted and accepted his gifts – but when it came time to make the pay-off, she'd acted as if he was some sex-starved stranger.

Bitch.

Whore.

Weren't they all?

He didn't like to think about The Girl, because it was her fault he'd spent the last seven years of his life in jail.

Angrily he banished her from his thoughts. She'd got what she'd deserved.

Sometimes he awoke in the middle of the night and saw her face before him. Those night-time hours overpowered him, filled him with lustful memories until he was forced to relieve the tension by his own hand.

He hated her for what she'd done to him.

He loved her. He always would.

The Man left his room, locking the door behind him.

The black maid had a room on the premises. He suspected she spied on him. If she didn't stop he'd be forced to add her to his list.

His rented car was parked at the bottom of the driveway. He changed the licence plates unobserved and got behind the wheel.

It was a long drive to Agoura Hills and he didn't intend to be late.

CHAPTER NINE



They sat side by side in the beauty salon — Cheryl was getting her legs waxed while Jordanna had a manicure. It was a weekly ritual, there was always maintenance to take care of. 'I'm having a party,' Cheryl announced, adding casually 'You can come if you like.'

'What sort of party?' Jordanna asked suspiciously. It was almost a week since Cheryl had announced her plans to become a Hollywood madam and none of her friends had heard from her since.

'A get-together which will include a few of my girls: plenty of would-be clients,' Cheryl said airily. 'I've been on the phone all week.'

'Thanks for the invite, but I don't think so.'

'Grant's coming.'

'I'm sure he is.'

'I wish you'd support me in this.'

'Why? We've done some crazy shit in our time, but it beats everything. You've lost it, Cheryl.'

'Be like that.'

'I will.'

'I have some information you might be interested in,' Cheryl said mysteriously. Jordanna examined her nails. They were long and shiny and strong. The good news was she had finally managed to stop biting them — a minor triumph.

'What information?' she asked curiously.

'It's juicy.'

'So tell.'

'Not here.'

Sometimes – most times – Cheryl was an annoying pain in the ass. Since her new vocation she was impossible.

'What's it about?' Jordanna asked.

'Your latest stepmother.'

Jordanna buried a yawn. 'What's she done now?'

'It's not what she's done *now*,' Cheryl said, staring pointedly at the Puerto Rican woman diligently waxing her legs. 'We'll talk later, in private.'

Jordanna hated having to wait for anything, especially information. 'Spill it, Cheryl,' she said emphatically.

'This is *not* news for *The Enquirer*,' Cheryl replied primly. 'Learn to be patient.'

'The last thing I am is patient.'

'Don't I know it!'

'So?'

'So where did your father meet Kim?'

Shaking her head Jordanna said, 'Oh, like I know. Following his love life is not exactly number one on my agenda.'

'Try asking her,' Cheryl suggested. 'See what she says.'

'Why?'

'Just try it.'

'And when I have this important piece of info you'll tell me all?'

'We'll have lunch tomorrow at Café Roma. One thirty. Your cheque. I promise you it'll be worth it.'

☆ ☆ ☆

'Hi, Daddy.'

Jordan Levitt looked up from his desk with an expression of surprise. 'A visit. From my daughter. Who died?'

'Thought I'd drop by, check out how you're doing,' Jordanna replied, ignoring his sarcasm as she flopped into one of the oversize leather chairs stationed in front of his massive oak desk.

'How nice of you to make the long trek from the guest

house,' Jordan said, removing his horn-rimmed reading glasses and smiling broadly.

God, he's handsome, Jordanna thought. What is it with him? He doesn't get older, just more attractive.

'I suppose your allowance is in need of a boost,' he added, sliding open a drawer and removing his chequebook.

'No,' Jordanna said, disappointed that he thought that's what she wanted. 'Scoring more money is not the only reason I come to see you.'

He placed his chequebook on the desk and picked up a gold pen. 'That's reassuring.'

She fidgeted uncomfortably. 'I . . . uh . . . I guess I missed you.' It was difficult for her to say, but she really wanted him to know how she felt. She craved his love and affection, but he was usually too busy giving it all to his current wife. It would be so nice if he responded in the same way.

Jordan looked pleased. 'Missed me, huh?'

'Well, you *are* my father, and since you got married again . . .' She trailed off, not quite sure what she was planning to say. 'By the way,' she added, 'where did you and Kim meet?'

'What a question!'

'Pretty normal.'

'A mutual friend introduced us.'

'How nice.'

A critical tone entered Jordan's voice. 'Since I married Kim we've invited you to the big house for dinner on countless occasions. You haven't shown up once.'

'I've been busy.'

His face turned stern. 'Doing what?'

'Writing,' she said defensively. 'I'm writing a book.' Hmm, not quite, but it was a good idea.

That stopped him. 'A book? About what?'

It came to her in a flash. 'Growing up in Hollywood.'

He was silent for a moment. When he finally spoke it was very slowly, making sure she understood every word. 'No about this family, I hope.'

Why did they always end up fighting – because that's the way this conversation was headed and they both knew it.

Jordanna thrust out her jaw, ready for battle. 'Maybe. If I feel like it,' she said in her best don't-you-tell-me-what-to-do voice.

'No, Jordanna,' he said curtly.

Challenging words. 'No what?' she said quickly.

'No revelations about this family. Do you understand me?'

She wanted to tell him to go screw himself. She was quite capable of telling anyone else, anyone except her father, who was still able to reduce her to a nervous twelve-year-old. 'I've got a contract,' she lied. 'With a big publishing firm.'

His left eye twitched, a sure sign he was severely angry. 'Which one?'

'That's my business,' she said, feeling like a defiant little girl.

'How much have they paid you?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I think you'll find it does.'

'What does *that* mean?'

He stood up, glaring at her. 'It means it better be enough to support yourself, because if you're writing a book about this family, young lady, you can get the hell out of my guest house and go live elsewhere.'

Her eyes filled with tears, but with a supreme effort she managed to keep them in check. Couldn't let him see. Couldn't let him know he could still get to her.

'Fine,' she said coolly, jumping to her feet. 'I'll go pack.'

'Do that,' he said roughly.

Fuck you, Daddy, I will.

She rushed from the room, mission unaccomplished. All she'd wanted to find out was where he'd met Kim, and look where they'd ended up, fighting as usual. When was she going to learn that arguing with her father was a no-win situation? Now she was out on her own with nowhere to go. She hurried to the guest house and called Shep. 'I need a place to crash,' she said, speaking rapidly.

Shep sighed, he'd heard it before. 'One night? Two?'

This time it's permanent. I can't take his
more - I'm moving out for

'Sure,' Shep said, not believing her.
'I mean it,' she insisted.
'You always do.'

'Can I come over or not?'

'I suppose so,' he said, not filled with enthusiasm.
She ran back and forth, piling her car full of as much stuff as it would take, jumped in, and roared off down the long driveway.

☆ ☆ ☆

From his study window Jordan watched her go. So beautiful, so unsettled, so like her mother.

Dammit, he wished there was something he could do for her, but the truth was he had no idea what Jordanna wanted. Materially he'd given her everything possible. A place to live, a new car of her choice every year, charge cards and a generous allowance. He'd never said no to her, how could he?

For a moment his mind wandered and he thought about Lillianne - his first wife, the mother of his children, and the one true love of his life. Certifiable. Everyone had said so. When he'd signed the papers to put her away in the private clinic it was for her own protection. How was he to know she'd slit her wrists and die a miserable death, leaving him with two children to bring up on his own? Of course, he hadn't been on his own for long, marrying again had seemed like a good idea, except the children had never taken to any of his wives - a shame because he'd tried a few.

And then, as if he didn't have enough problems, his only son had killed himself - a boy with everything to live for.

The police said drugs had caused Jamie to jump from the forty-sixth floor of Jordan's New York penthouse. Jordan didn't know what to believe, his son was no drug addict, as far as he was concerned it was a terrible accident.

For a while Jordan was shattered. The press pounced on him, Jordanna had turned into a wild thing and his life was a mess. But Jordan knew better than anyone how to survive

After all, he'd arrived in Hollywood as a sixteen-year-old runaway in 1948 with no money and no prospects. Over the years he'd built himself a formidable reputation, it would take more than a few tragedies to pull Jordan Levitt down.

Within the next few months he'd sent Jordanna off to boarding school in Paris, divorced his current wife, and produced two new movies.

Kim entered his study, interrupting his thoughts. Out of all his wives Kim was the youngest and the most loving. She put him above all else, and it was damn refreshing to have a woman who cared so much for him. What did it matter that she was nearly forty years his junior, age was irrelevant.

'Curtain samples,' Kim announced, waving a swatch of fabric in the air. 'I need your opinion, darling.'

She was redecorating his house and doing an excellent job. It was costing, but whoever said women came cheap?

He stood up, towering over his young bride. 'Come here, little one,' he said, opening his arms.

Kim ran into his embrace, and they stood entwined while Jordanna zoomed down Sunset in her white Porsche, tears streaming down her face as Jimi Hendrix blasted full volume on the tape deck.



The next day a composed Jordanna Levitt sashayed into Café Roma, nodding at a few acquaintances, taking in the action, checking out the usual group of Italian out-of-work actors who gathered at a corner table comparing testosterone levels, job opportunities, and how many girls they'd fucked.

Cheryl was already there, sitting at a table drinking coffee, studiously making copious notes on a yellow legal pad.

'I'm not late, am I?' Jordanna asked, glancing quickly at her Cartier Panthier watch.

'Nope,' Cheryl replied, putting down her pen. 'I was here early. Had to interview a girl, a gorgeous blonde from Dallas.'

'Christ!' Jordanna exclaimed. 'You're even beginning to talk like a pimp. Did you inspect her teeth?'
Cheryl allowed herself a small smile. 'Sensational teeth.'
'I was being sarcastic,' Jordanna said sternly.
'So what else is new?' Cheryl replied, adding more Sweet 'n' Low to her coffee and stirring it vigorously.
Jordanna shrugged. 'Nothing much. I moved out.'
'Again?'
'This time for real.'

'Well . . .' Cheryl said. 'I guess I have to tell you the big scoop.'

Jordanna couldn't wait. 'Yes?'
Without further ado Cheryl gave her the news. 'Your stepmother was a whore,' she said, relishing every word.

Jordanna blinked. 'Excuse me?'
'Actually we don't call them whores,' Cheryl added nonchalantly. 'Party girls is the politically correct way of referring to them.'

Jordanna frowned. 'Are you f-ing with me?'

'Would I do that?' Cheryl asked innocently.

'I certainly hope not. This is way too serious to joke about.'

Cheryl began explaining. 'I found her in Donna's file: Kimberly Anna Austin from San Diego. She worked for Donna a good six months, then she met your father and that was it, retirement city.'

Jordanna was in shock, it was just too bizarre. 'Are you sure it's the same girl?'

'Absolutely positive. Donna was very thorough. She kept a complete dossier on every girl who worked for her, including a photo.'

Jordanna drummed her fingers on the table. 'Can I see it?'
Digging into her purse, Cheryl produced a glossy photograph and handed it over.

Jordanna studied it. Oh yes, it was Kim all right. Little Miss Sweetness and Light. Boy, had she gotten lucky, landing a man like Jordan Levitt.

'Yes, it's her,' Jordanna said slowly. 'Oh, shit! What am I supposed to do, tell him?'

'Knowing your father, I have a feeling he wouldn't appreciate it,' Cheryl replied. 'Talk about a blow to the male ego.'

'I can't *not* tell him.'

'He'll find out eventually — let him do it on his own time, believe me, you don't want to be involved, it'll only embarrass him.'

'I suppose you're right,' Jordanna replied, torn between the desire to reveal Kim's little game, and yet not wanting to be the one to hurt her father.

Why not?

Why yes? He's never done anything to intentionally hurt me. Ah, but he has hurt you. In fact, he's just thrown you out.

'You're not going to tell anyone about this, are you?' she asked, knowing what a big mouth Cheryl had.

'I run a clean business,' Cheryl said, very full of herself. 'My clients are assured of discretion and privacy at all times.'

'He's not your client,' Jordanna pointed out.

'He could be,' Cheryl replied knowingly. 'Once Kim is history.' Taking a sip of coffee she added, 'I have some really lovely girls, you know. If you come across any would-be clients, send them my way. I'll pay you commission.'

'You're unbelievable!'

'Thanks for the compliment.'

☆ ☆ ☆

It was early in the morning when Mac Brooks picked up the phone and called Bobby Rush. He'd spent the previous evening arguing with Sharleen. She hadn't wanted him to call Bobby direct, she'd preferred that he do the dance of a thousand agents. But Mac wasn't in the mood for all that agent crap, half the time they caused deals to fail, and he wanted this one to fly.

He had a strong feeling *Thriller Eyes* was done.

winner, and he was definitely interested in directing agents could get into it *after* he'd made a verbal commitment - that way they couldn't do too much damage.

Bobby answered his own phone - a good sign because there was nothing worse than having to plough through an entourage every time you needed to reach the star.

'Hey, Bobby,' he said. 'It's Mac Brooks. Remember that high-ticket ride we were talking about? I've decided to take it with you, so, all I need to know is, when do we get started?'

CHAPTER 7



Michael had never felt more helpless in his life, and it wasn't a feeling he enjoyed. His gut instinct told him Bella was all right, but the reality was he couldn't find her and it was making him frantic. When he finally reached Rita's aunt in New York she knew nothing, she still had the same old address for her niece with whom she was not close.

'How about her girlfriends?' Michael asked, referring to three big-haired Brooklyn blondes with loud mouths and bad attitudes whose names escaped him.

Rita's aunt promised to try and track them down. Two days of silence and he knew he had to do something fast before he went nuts.

He dropped by and visited Lily again, taking her flowers, hoping the attention might loosen her memory.

It didn't. She still couldn't remember anything.

He went downstairs to Rita's apartment and sat on the couch for a while. He'd already searched the place thoroughly, looking for a clue, anything to help find her. He remembered when they were married Rita used to hide things - money, her few bits of jewellery, letters from old boyfriends he wasn't supposed to know about. She'd always chosen odd hiding-places like ceiling light fixtures and the bottom of vacuum bags. He'd searched this apartment thoroughly, but decided to do it again for luck.

He started in the kitchen, graduating to the poky little

orting through everything,
ty laundry.
erie, there was a ton of it, push-up
ashioned stockings and pantihose in

ne first time he'd gone out with her
she was trouble, but somehow or
gotten in the way of rational thought

December
worn a white satin dress studded with faux diamonds and cut
way too low at the front.

He'd worn a dark suit and a dazed smile.

Rita was four months pregnant.
He was drunk.

Since she had no family, his had turned out in force.
other Sal, smirking proudly as he tried to cop more than a
ok down the bride's revealing neckline. His mother, Vir-
inia, a thin nervous woman who never stopped chain-
moking. His stepfather, Eddie, fat and old, plagued with
arthritis. Plus a scattering of relatives and friends.

Michael remembered frantically dry humping his bride in
the rented limo on the way to their honeymoon hotel. He
and Rita were so hot for each other they couldn't wait.

When his hard-on finally faded he'd decided it was time to
sober up. Rita no longer held the same fascination.

Now Rita had vanished with his kid and he felt like he
was drowning. No clues. Nowhere to look. And the cops had
nothing.

Lighting up a cigarette, he blew smoke rings towards the
ceiling and focused his mind.

Rita used to love dancing. Saturday nights she'd get all
dressed up, they'd hire a babysitter and hit the town. In his
drinking days he'd made out pretty good on the dance floor.
Once he stopped boozing it didn't work out.

'You won't take me, I'll go with the girls,' she'd threatened,
daring him to argue.

He was perfectly happy staying home in front of the TV watching a ball game while Bella slept peacefully in the other room.

Was Rita still dancing on Saturday nights?
If she was alive she was still dancing.

The thought of foul play sent a chill through him. He had a daughter out there somewhere and he was determined to find her.

Stubbing out his cigarette, he took one final look around and headed back to the Robbins' place.



Kennedy was on time, she prided herself on always being punctual.

Bobby Rush was late. His publicist, Elspeth, an angular redhead in her forties with too many freckles and a bad nose job, offered no excuses.

Kennedy sat on a couch in the outer office and steamed as an hour passed. At eleven o'clock she said, 'Are you sure he's coming?'

'I can't do more than tell him,' Elspeth replied in a not-too-pleasant voice. She'd been on the phone for most of the hour conducting a low angry conversation with someone who was obviously her husband or boyfriend.

'Yes, you can,' Kennedy replied. 'I suggest you find out where he is and ask him.'

Elspeth gave a put-upon sigh and made a couple of phone calls. 'Apparently his assistant thought the interview was Monday,' she said brusquely. 'He's in Palm Springs.'

'Oh, great,' Kennedy said, waiting for an apology.

The woman didn't say a word. Picking up her copy of a Chanel purse she hurried to the door.

Kennedy got up and followed her. 'That's it, then? No Bobby Rush today?'

'I told you,' Elspeth said, irritated at having to repeat herself. 'He's in Palm Springs. Be here.'

Clutching her fake Chanel she walked out without a reply.

Unbelievably rude, Kennedy thought. There was nothing worse than a publicist who thought they were as important as the star they looked after. Bobby Rush must be stupid to employ such a person.

The day loomed ahead of her with nothing planned, and that really annoyed her, because she prided herself on being totally organized at all times. Phil used to call her queen of the lists — everything written down in an orderly fashion. He might have laughed at her organizational skills, but they'd sure accomplished a lot in their years together covering the world. They'd earned respect and kudos from the journalistic community *and* had a wonderful time. Now she was doing interviews with two-bit actors who couldn't even be bothered to turn up.

Damn Mason, he'd dangled the bait and she'd jumped at the hell had happened to all her journalistic integrity? Furious with herself, she left the office determined to talk Mason and see if she could get Bobby Rush's cover mped.

She marched down the corridor, buzzed the elevator and waited impatiently. Somebody had it stalled on the ground floor because nothing happened. After a few moments she banged on the doors sending an impatient message from the second floor. Of course she could have walked down the stairs but why should she? The way things were going she'd probably trip and break her neck.

Just as she was about to hammer again, the elevator arrived, the doors opened and a man in running shorts, a cut-off T-shirt and a baseball cap stepped out. 'Sorry,' he said pleasantly. 'Did I keep you waiting?'

'Yes,' she replied, taking her bad mood out on him. 'You know what it's like,' he said, smiling disarmingly. 'Some guy grabbed me downstairs and I couldn't close the doors and I couldn't get out.'

'You should've gotten out,' she said frostily.

As she spoke the door of the elevator closed again and the elevator took off.

'Damn!' she exclaimed.

'Sorry,' he said apologetically. 'Are you running late?'

'It's not my day,' she replied, with a rueful shake of her head. 'I had an appointment with Bobby Rush and he failed to show.'

'You're here for the interview?'

'That's right.'

'Then come on in, we can do it now.'

'Mr *Rush* is in Palm Springs,' she said sarcastically. 'Mr *Rush* is too busy to do an interview today.'

'Hey,' he said, grinning. 'Mr *Rush* is standing right here, and I am in desperate need of an assistant, so let's go.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'You're Bobby Rush?'

His grin widened. 'Guilty.'

'I didn't recognize you,' she said, stating the obvious. It was quite apparent that he likewise had no idea who she was or the real reason she was there.

He was already on his way to his office. Turning around he beckoned her. 'Come on,' he said, with an encouraging wink, 'you can make coffee while I shower.'

Oh, great, the little woman makes coffee, and the big man takes a shower. What a chauvinist! Was he going to come on to her, too? Sexual harassment would be a bonus. Her adrenalin began to pump. This story had possibilities.

'I gave everybody the day off,' he explained, as she followed him into his office. 'Monday we start pre-production on my movie, they won't get another free day until we finish.'

'What movie is that?' she asked.

'*Thriller Eyes*,' he said. 'If you get the job you can read the script.'

Lucky me, she thought, as they moved through the outer office into his private domain.

Gesturing to a small bar he said, 'Coffee's in the fridge, office machine's over there. I take it black, no sugar.' He opened a side door and she caught a glimpse of his

as he walked in. Hmm . . . what could be better
interviewing Bobby Rush when he thought *he* was interview-
ing *her*.

She looked around his office — it was light and airy,
furnished in minimalist style. There were movie posters on
the walls, a stack of scripts on his desk, and nothing much
else of interest.

Opening the small fridge, she took out a packet of ground
coffee and shook the right amount into the machine.

Over the sound of the shower she heard a knock from the
outer office. She went into the other room and opened the
door.

An earnest young woman wearing owl-shaped glasses
stood there. 'Hi,' the young woman said, 'I'm Jenny Scott.
I'm here for the interview with Mr Rush.'

'Oh, Jenny,' Kennedy said, feeling guilty — but a story was
told and she was on a roll. 'Mr Rush isn't available today.
In you be here Monday at ten?'

'Well, yes . . . ' Jenny said unsurely. 'But I was told it was
kind of urgent.'

'Not that urgent,' Kennedy said crisply. 'Come back on
Monday, he'll be happy to see you then.'

The young woman left and she went back to the coffee
machine, poured two mugs of black coffee with no sugar and
sat down on the other side of his modern glass and chrome
desk.

Bobby emerged a few minutes later clad in faded jeans, a
UCLA sweatshirt and a big grin. His dirty blond hair was
wet and curly. 'Jeez, that feels better,' he said. 'The only
problem is I'm starving. How about walking over to the
commissary?'

'Sure,' she said, deciding he was much better looking in
person than on the big screen. He had these penetrating clear
blue eyes and a certain energy about him. Sexually attractive
definitely.

Who cared? Maybe her readers would.

'OK, let's go,' he said, already out the door.

She trailed him from the building, checking him out from behind. He had a confident walk and a tight butt.

Hmm . . . very nice . . .

Once outside, he covered his blue eyes with dark shades. She did the same.

'So,' he said, as they strolled over to the commissary. 'I was expecting someone younger. This job is for a gofer, a kid who's prepared to do a lot of running around for me. You look like you passed that stage in your career.'

'It's something to do,' she replied.

He lifted his glasses and pinned her with his intense eyes. 'Something to do for fun, huh?'

'That's right,' she said, refusing to be sucked in by his movie-star charm.

'I'm very demanding,' he said, watching her closely.

'I'm sure you are.'

'What I'm trying to say is, it may be fun for you, but I expect the person I hire to be there at all times of the day and night.'

'Day and night?' she asked quizzically.

'You get to go home to sleep.'

'How reassuring.'

'What was your last job?' he asked.

'I worked for a magazine in New York.'

'Hey,' he began to laugh, 'you're not going to hand me your unfinished screenplay, are you?'

'No, Mr Rush, I can assure you I'm not.'

'Call me Bobby.'

They entered the commissary. Bobby waved to several people as they made their way to his usual table.

As soon as they sat down a middle-aged waitress was all over him. 'Hello, Bobby. Are we baconing and egging it today, or is it the fruit thing?'

'The fruit thing, sweetheart,' he said, patting his wash-board stomach. 'Gotta watch those rolls of fat.'

The waitress giggled. 'Not to worry. Bobby, I'll watch 'em, every other woman

'Hey, who cares about other women when you're around, Mavis,' he said, giving her a friendly pat on the ass.

More giggles from the waitress who was old enough to know better.

He picked up a menu. 'What'll you have?' he asked Kennedy.

'An orange juice will do nicely,' she replied.

'No muffins? No bacon and eggs?'

'Tell me, uh . . . Bobby, do you always buy breakfast for the people you interview?'

Now he was definitely coming on to her. 'Only when they're as beautiful as you,' he said, fixing her once again with the baby blues. 'What did you say your name was?'



Halfway down the freeway it occurred to Michael that he hadn't been thorough enough in searching through Rita's dirty laundry. All he'd done was tip it on the floor, taken a cursory poke through it, and then stuffed it back in the bag. But Rita was devious and he knew it. Something told him to turn the car around and take another look.

Driving off at the next ramp he headed back to her place.

When he arrived, Lily was leaning from her window.

'You remember anything yet, Lily?' he called up to her.

'Still thinking, Mister Cop,' she said coyly, fluttering her eyelashes.

'Don't forget, if you come up with anything at all you've got my number.'

He entered Rita's apartment, went straight to the laundry bag, once again tipped everything on to the floor, and started a more methodical search. She sure was into lingerie - there were lacy bras, skimpy teddies, and a variety of other delicate little items. It brought back all the memories. When the sex was good it was very good.

Picking up a pair of black pantihose he noticed something stuffed in the foot. Investigating further, he discovered three

Polaroids and a slip of paper with a name and a number written on it.

He checked out the Polaroids first. They were standard Rita, she'd always gotten off on having fun with a camera. In the first photo she wore nothing but a smile, a black lace garterbelt and roll-up stockings. The second one showed her minus the garterbelt, smile firmly in place. And the third was of a greasy-looking man with an enormous hard-on pointed straight at the camera.

Michael quickly read the scrawl on the piece of paper, recognizing Rita's bad handwriting. Heron Jones, she'd written. Club Erotica.

Pocketing the information, he threw the clothes back into the laundry bag, dumped it on the bathroom floor and hurried from the apartment.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Bobby Rush felt good, breakfast with a beautiful woman it for him every time. He'd enjoyed meeting Kennedy Ch even though she wasn't right for the job, she sure something.

He'd walked her to her car from the commissary. 'Y the one should have been doing the talking, not me,' said with a rueful smile.

'Really?'

'That's usually the way it goes. I was supposed interviewing *you*, and you ended up asking all the ques'

'That's because I like to know what I'm getting into'

'Well, you sure found out. I think I told you my lif'

'It was interesting.'

'Uh, Kennedy, I'll be honest with you. You're qualified for this job.'

'You have no idea what my qualifications are.'

'No, but I bet they're first rate.'

She'd laughed. Great laugh, very throaty. 'Th like one of those breakup lines where the guy sa' too good for me, so I have to go find someone nev'

He'd laughed too. 'I have to admit I've used couple of times.'

'So you're into using lines?'

'Isn't everyone?'

'I'm not.'

'That makes you very unusual.'

at
He'd watched her drive off. Classy lady. He'd give it a day, send her flowers, maybe take her on a date, get laid.

Ha! He was starting to think like his father. God forbid! Get laid, huh? It had been quite some time. Getting laid was not what it used to be. AIDS was out there now and casual sex was a thing of the past.

He was well aware that just because he was a movie star he could have almost anyone he wanted. But today that didn't mean shit.

He was on edge. Tonight was the big night – dinner with Jerry. Darla had insisted the reunion take place at the family mansion with both his brothers and their wives present. Great, and he didn't have a date. Maybe it was just as well – this way Jerry couldn't put a move on whomever he was with.

He was apprehensive about seeing his father after all these years, although deep down he was hopeful that Jerry might have changed, that maybe he'd tell him he was proud of him and all his achievements. Wouldn't it be something to hear that from his old man?

Dream on. Jerry is a selfish sonofabitch, he's always been a selfish sonofabitch. Why would he change?

☆ ☆ ☆

'Are we going to Cheryl's party?' Shep asked, pottering around his tiny neat kitchen.

'Why?' Jordanna replied, biting into an apple as she sat at the counter flicking through the pages of *L.A. Weekly*.

'It might be amusing.'

She put down the newspaper. 'Amusing to mix with a room full of hookers? I don't think so.'

'Come on, Jordy, you used to be adventurous.'

'You go if you want, but the thought of going to a party at Cheryl's while she pursues her new career as *the* Hollywood madam is not my idea of a fun night out.'

'OK, OK,' Shep said. 'Let's meet later at JJ.'

thinking about Cheryl's revelations and wondering if she should tell Jordan. After all, if Kim used to be a working girl, surely her father was entitled to know?

Maybe I'll tell him.

Maybe not. You want him to be even more pissed at you?

I don't care.

Oh, yes, you do.

She called an actor friend of hers who was fun to be with and always had a great supply of pot. 'Wanna cruise the clubs tonight?' she asked hopefully.

'I've got a new girlfriend,' he said.

'Bring her along -- I don't care.'

'Sure, *you* don't care, but *she* probably will.'

'Don't tell me you've hooked up with one of those jealous little things?' she needed.

He sounded uptight, definitely pussy-whipped. 'You could try that.'

She hung up the phone. Men. They sure as hell didn't make good best friends. But, hey, she didn't need a man to take her around, she could cruise on her own. In fact, hitting the clubs by herself allowed her more freedom.

After Shep left she watched a couple of movies on television, ordered a large pepperoni pizza from Jacopos, and shortly before eleven pulled on her oldest jeans, a pair of motorcycle boots, a man's oversize shirt and a Harley jacket.

Jordanna was ready to hit the streets.

☆ ☆ ☆

Standing outside the house on Bedford brought back every bad memory. Bobby felt like a kid again, a stupid little kid whose father always put him down and told him he was useless.

Had to get his head straight. Had to remember he was not a kid. He was a successful businessman, producer, movie star.

Screw Jerry Rush. He was not afraid of him any more. He

was going to walk into the house like a man and bow with respect.

The black barman who'd worked for the Rusty twenty-three years opened the front door. 'Mr Bobby man exclaimed with a welcoming smile. 'Good to see you again after all this time.'

Bobby nodded. 'Thanks, Jimmy.'

He entered the house like a stranger. Darla had changed all the furniture. Hollywood wives had nothing much except redecorate and give great charity, and Darla was no exception.

He walked through the hallway, passing a familiar Picasso on his left, and a glass-fronted cabinet of African artefacts on his right. He strolled into the main living room trying to appear at ease.

Jerry sat in his favourite chair nursing a Scotch on rocks. As soon as he spotted Bobby, he put down his drink, got up and threw open his arms. 'Welcome home, Bobby,' he said magnanimously, as if playing to an attentive audience. 'Hello, Dad,' Bobby said, hanging back.

Gathered in the living room were Darla, clad in a bright-pink Valentino suit and tasteful diamonds; Len, a florid-faced man with an aggravatingly large nose; Trixie; and stepbrother, Stan, with his wife, Linda, a *Playboy* bunny who'd put on thirty pounds since Bobby's last days. From what Bobby had heard, Stan still fostered a cocaine habit and his wife was into pill popping. 'Hello, everyone,' Bobby said, hoping he didn't sound insincere as he felt. 'Nice to see you all.'

'Bobby,' Darla floated over, greeting him with a warm smile. 'Glad you're here. We're all delighted.'

Trixie darted across the room. She was a young woman with small beady eyes and a snub nose. 'How would you like to speak at the next lunch, Bobby?' she asked, never once taking her eyes off him. 'I'll be there once a month to discuss politics and world affairs. It's quite a cultural group and we'd love you to join it. What do you think?' 'Do it for me?'

'My schedule's full, Trixie.'

She pursed her lips. 'Too important for family now, is that it?' she asked peevishly.

It was starting already. 'No, Trixie, just too busy.'

He moved away from his annoying sister-in-law. Len came over and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Doin' pretty good, baby brother.'

'Yeah, things seem to have worked out.'

'Maybe we can talk about something for me?'

Christ! Nothing like getting hit on the moment he entered the house.

'So, Bobby,' Jerry said in a loud booming voice. 'When you gonna produce a movie for your old man to star in, huh? *Huh?* It's about time.'

This evening was going to be twice as bad as he'd imagined.



By the time she reached Homebase Central Jordanna was on a high. She'd stopped off at a couple of other clubs, talked to friends, done a little dancing, a little gossiping, smoked a little grass.

I thought your drug days were over?

They are. This is just recreational fun.

Bullshit.

Arnie was right up front, greeting her with a sloppy kiss on both cheeks. 'How's it goin', Levitt?'

She sighed. 'If you're going to call me anything, Arnie, call me Jordanna, it *is* my name.'

He scowled. 'OK, OK. Don't go getting mad at me.'

'Who said I was mad?'

'I know your moods.'

No you do not. 'Is the gang here?' she asked restlessly.

'Nope. Your group hasn't arrived.'

'They will.'

Moving closer he lowered his voice, speaking near to her

ear. 'I understand Cheryl's going into business, she's asked me to find her girls.'

'That should be easy for you.'

'I'll want commission.'

'Of course you will, Arnie.'

'Can I buy you a drink?'

'No, that's OK.'

Making a fast getaway she wandered through the club, looking for someone she knew, or at least someone she might want to spend time with. The pickings were sparse.

As she passed Charlie Dollar's table, he waved at her. 'Hey, come sit with an old man.'

'That's an irresistible invitation,' she said, strolling over.

'You're always in such a hurry,' he said, with a crooked smile.

'Better to be in a hurry than to be left behind,' she replied coolly.

He slid over in the leather booth patting the spot next to him. 'I know your father,' he announced.

'Everyone knows Jordan,' she said, sliding in beside him because she had nothing better to do.

'Knew your mother, too.'

'Hmm, you're a regular friend of the family.'

'I've been watching you,' he said, stoned eyes still watching her.

'Why?' she replied.

'Cause you're different.'

'I am?'

'You am.'

Suddenly she was sitting there having a major flirtation with Charlie Dollar, a man old enough to be her father.

Oh, God, what are you doing, Jordanna?

Something that will really piss Daddy off.

Dinner was a nightmare. Bobby didn't know how he got through it. Fact of life. He'd grown out of his family and he didn't have to take their crap any more, especially Jerry's.

Darla tried to make everything all right, but she could only do so much. Jerry didn't apologize for the past, he didn't apologize for anything. He merely sat at the head of the table guzzling Scotch and voicing his views on how the industry was falling to pieces because all they wanted to know about was hiring young talent.

'Movies today,' Jerry pontificated. 'Got no point of view. They got nothing going for them. All you see are two-bit hookers flashing their tits, an' a bunch of muscle-bound assholes who can't act their way out of a sandbox.'

Gee, thanks, Dad, Bobby wanted to say. But then he realized it didn't matter. He didn't need his father's approval any more.

'I'm not talking about *your* movie,' Jerry said, burping loudly. 'Not that I've seen it, but I hear it's pretty damn good.'

Screw you, Dad. How come you haven't seen it? How come everybody else in America has?

'Thought you'd run it for me,' Jerry continued. 'I'll come by the studio. Hear you've got offices there.'

Oh, yeah, sure. I'll have you over to see my movie.

No fucking way.

'I'll get you a print,' he said. 'You can show it in your screening room here.'

'We don't use the screening room any more,' Jerry said. 'Costs too much.'

Oh, so now the great Jerry Rush was going to plead poverty?

'Don't be ridiculous,' Darla interrupted, quite flustered. 'I'll call the projectionist.'

Jerry shot her a deadly look. 'I'm not paying a fucking projectionist to come to my fucking house and charge me a fucking fortune to see a movie I can see in my son's screening room at the studio.'

'We have our own screening room, it's stupid not to use it,' Darla said, tight-mouthed.

'You miss our screenings, don't you?' Jerry sneered. 'You miss all those freeloading friends of yours.'

'Jerry, please!'

He was not to be stopped. 'How many people did we have over every weekend? We fed 'em, showed 'em a movie, while they drank all my booze an' badmouthed me behind my back. Then they ran out on us when my fucking career stopped.'

'That's not true,' Darla said, her face flushed. 'Your career is fine.'

Jerry laughed hollowly. 'Isn't it nice to have a loyal wife.'

'Please, Jerry. Don't start.'

'Wake up, Darla. We don't get invitations any more.'

'I can show you a pile of invitations,' Darla said defensively.

'For charities we gotta pay for. Big fucking deal.' He icked up his drink, took a swig and muttered, 'I don't need neir lousy invitations. Let 'em stay the fuck away. Who gives rat's ass except you.'

Later, Darla took Bobby to one side. 'Your father's getting old,' she explained. 'He doesn't like to go out any more. He suffers with his hip. I know he hasn't said anything to you, but eventually, if it gets any worse, he may have to undergo hip-replacement surgery. Don't mention I told you.'

Oh, Jesus, was she trying to make him feel sorry for the old man?

'Cash is a little tight, I'll admit that,' Darla added. 'But we do have a fine portfolio of stocks and investments.'

What was she going to do now? Touch him for a loan?

'If it was up to me I'd sell the house and move to a condo on Wilshire. We don't need this big place now all you boys are gone.'

Do what you like, Darla, he wanted to say. It's nothing to do with me. I've moved on. I don't have to put up with him any more.

She glanced restlessly around the club, wondering where Shep was. 'I wanted to be, but my father didn't go for the idea.'

'Jordan's right. You don't wanna be an actress, it's a shitty profession.'

'You're an actor,' she pointed out. 'And *you've* done pretty good.'

Running his tongue across his teeth he eyed her contem-
platively. 'Like I said, it's a shitty profession. I happen to be in the fortunate position of being able to choose what I do, but most actors and actresses gotta eat crap, deal with asshole executives, not to mention the jerks, pricks and mother-fucking know-nothings who call themselves agents an' managers. There's times even *I* have to kiss ass.'

'Oh, I can't imagine you doing that, Charlie,' she murmured sarcastically.

Grinning slyly, he said, 'I do it when I have to.'

'And how often is that?'

He leaned back in the booth and his grin broadened. 'Not very often, kiddo. Not very often.'

'I bet.'

'So,' he said slowly, 'I hear you're a wild one.'

'Who told you that?'

'Word's on the street, kiddo.'

'*Your* image is not exactly Mister Clean.'

'I'm an old guy, I can do anything I want an' just about get away with it.'

'How nice?'

He was giving her that stare again, that half-lidded
insouciant stare.

'Wanna go back to my house tonight, Jordanna?' he drawled.

'Are you having a party?'

'Yeah, for two.'

She didn't have to think about it, she knew what she was going to do. 'Two, huh?' she said coolly.

'That's what I said.'

stopped Arnie in his tracks. 'Where're you going, Charlie?' he asked, his voice a petulant whine.

Charlie ignored him, focusing on Bobby. 'Hey, Bobby, haven't seen *you* in a long time.'

'Six years,' Bobby said. 'I had seven lines and one close-up in your movie *Broad Street*.'

'I remember. Knew you were goin' places.'

Bobby laughed wryly. 'I didn't.'

Charlie patted him on the shoulder. 'Congrats, you done good. I liked your movie.'

'That's quite a compliment coming from you.'

'I only hand 'em out when they're deserved. Call me, Bobby, let's have lunch.'

'I'll do that.'

Charlie put his arm around Jordanna's waist and pulled her forward. 'You two know each other?'

Bobby stared at the girl with the long black hair and wild look. She was unusually beautiful in an off-beat way. 'No, I don't think we do.'

'Bet you know her father,' Charlie said with a wicked wink. 'Jordan Levitt.'

'Of course I know Jordan,' Bobby said quickly.

'And I know Jerry Rush,' Jordanna interjected, furious that Charlie was giving her billing.

Bobby sensed her anger and attempted to put things right. 'Now wait a minute—' he began.

'How do *you* like it?' she interrupted. 'Bobby Rush, Jerry's son. Got a ring to it?'

'I wasn't trying to piss you off.'

Charlie chuckled. 'What is this, a "who has the most famous father" contest? Nobody gives a shit.'

'Apparently *you* do,' Jordanna said angrily.

'Get over it, sweetheart,' Charlie said, tightening his grip on her waist. 'Nice seein' you, Bobby. Don't forget to give me a buzz. C'mon, kiddo, we're outta here.'

Arnie could not believe Charlie was leaving with the love of his life. 'Is there a party tonight, Charlie?' he asked hopefully.

'Nothing I'm inviting *you* to, Arnie.'

'Should I stop by later?'

'Nope.'

'I don't believe it,' Arnie mumbled, watching them leave.

'What?' Bobby asked.

'Charlie and Jordanna.'

'She seems a little young for him.'

'Nobody's too young for Charlie,' Arnie said bitterly, his mouth twitching with frustration.

'She's great looking,' Bobby remarked.

'Great looking and out of her head,' Arnie said sourly.

'The last thing she needs is Charlie.'

'Bobby!' Gary appeared, pulling a pretty girl behind him.

'Thought you'd never make it. How was dinner?'

'Torture,' Bobby replied, moving away from Arnie. 'Pure and simple torture.'



Charlie lived at the top of Miller Drive in an enormous house with sprawling grounds, a vast swimming-pool and a professional tennis court. Jordanna had insisted on taking her own car – a clean getaway was her thing, she didn't like feeling trapped with no escape route. She followed his Rolls up the winding driveway in her Porsche.

'This doesn't seem like your image,' she said, as they got out of their cars and stood side by side in the middle of his massive courtyard.

'What image is that?' he asked, amused.

'You know, you're kind of like the wild man of Hollywood. I didn't expect to see you behind the wheel of a Rolls.'

'Comfort is everything, kiddo. When you grow up you'll find out.'

'I can see that,' she said, as they entered his house.

Two large dogs raced over to greet him, a chocolate Labrador and a black Dobermann. 'Scared?' Charlie asked, as if secretly hoping she was.

'Me?' Jordanna replied scornfully. 'I'm not scared of any-

thing.' She bent to pet the dogs, rubbing their necks the way dogs enjoyed.

'You know what? I'm beginning to like you more and more,' Charlie said, leading her into his large living room, comfortably furnished with oversized brown leather couches and colourful paintings on every wall. Going straight to the bar he poured them both a healthy shot of Jack Daniel's, adding ice. 'Whaddaya say? Wanna share a joint?'

'Just what I had in mind,' she replied, noticing his two Oscars casually placed on a bookshelf. 'I wasn't around in the sixties, but I'm so glad pot has made a comeback.'

He chuckled. 'Well, kiddo, I was, and as far as I'm concerned, it never went away.' Opening a silver box he extracted an already rolled joint. Then he picked up a packet of book matches, lit it, drew deeply and handed it to her. 'This is primo stuff. Enjoy.'

'I'm really surprised,' she said, with a hint of sarcasm. 'I thought you'd have lousy shit.'

'Ha! Funny.'

She drew the smoke deeply into her lungs inhaling slowly. Getting stoned wasn't as bad as doing coke, although if he'd suggested coke she probably would have done that too.

What the hell happened to all my good resolutions?

Tomorrow, tomorrow.

'Wanna see the rest of the house?' he drawled lazily.

'Tours are my thing,' she replied.

He reached out, gently touching her long black hair. 'I do like you,' he said.

'I'm so flattered,' she murmured, determined not to act like some dim-witted star fuck.

He took her hand and they walked up a curved staircase to his bedroom, an untidy room with an insane view dominated by an enormous circular bed covered in fur throws.

'Very luxurious,' she said, in spite of the fact that the room was incredibly messy, with newspapers scattered on the floor and stacks of magazines on every surface. 'Do you have music?'

'You want music?'

'That's why I asked.'

He opened a closet revealing a bank of expensive stereo equipment. After pressing a few buttons Mozart flooded the room.

'I'm not into classical,' she said.

He touched her hair again. 'What *are* you into?'

'Madonna. Prince. Bobby Brown. John Coltrane.'

'That's quite a mixture.'

'How about Madonna's "Bad Girl"?'

'Remind you of yourself?'

'Of course.'

He looked at her quizzically. 'You're cute.'

'I've never been called cute before.'

'There's always a first time.'

'Yes, Charlie, there's always a first time,' she said, shrugging off her Harley jacket.

'How old are you?'

'Young enough to be your daughter.'

'Twenty?'

'Twenty-four.'

'An old broad, right?'

'Right.'

Picking up the phone he spoke into an internal intercom. 'Anyone in the house got Madonna, Prince or Bobby Brown CDs? Make it snappy.'

'What do you have, a staff of invisible popular music fans to stay up all night?' she enquired, imagining the help stumbling like crazy to accommodate their famous boss.

He smiled faintly. 'Something like that.'

'How about Coltrane?'

Indicating a Lucite box stacked with CDs over in the corner, he said, 'Check it out, maybe we'll get lucky.'

Oh, you'll definitely get lucky, she thought, feeling decidedly sure.

She rifled through his collection of CDs, finding nothing she liked. Then she started wondering what his body was like. He was old, fifty something at least, and older men were into working out and keeping it all together.

'Do you have a gym?' she asked casually.

'but I do have a few rolls of middle-aged spread you might be interested in.'

She couldn't help smiling. 'Oh, boy, you sure know how to turn a girl on.'

That same crazed grin. 'The truth is, kiddo, I've never found it to be a problem.'

'I *bet* you haven't.'

He sat down on the edge of the bed and patted the space beside him. 'Come over here.'

She strolled over, cool to the end, and stood in front of him.

He put his hands around her waist and pulled her close, then he unbuttoned her shirt and began licking ~~her bare~~ stomach, eventually sticking his tongue into her navel. It was strangely incredibly sexy.

She shrugged her shirt off, letting it fall to the floor.

'You taste like honey,' he said, pausing for a moment. 'Sweet, sweet honey.'

It was a nice compliment to which she had no flip reply. The combination of Jack Daniel's, pot and Charlie Dollar was making her very mellow indeed.

He touched her breasts, fingering her nipples with stubby fingers.

A disembodied voice boomed through the room. 'Mr D, Madonna and Prince are outside your door.'

'Holy shit!' Jordanna exclaimed, jumping back startled.

'Calm down,' Charlie soothed. 'It's only the intercom. I guess you got your music.'

'Wow! That's really service.'

'Kiddo, you ain't seen nothin' yet.'

By the time Madonna was on the stereo singing 'Bad Girl' Jordanna was ready to rock 'n' roll. Charlie was lighting another joint. She was already stoned - who needed more?

She wandered around the room half-naked, and began swaying to the music, mouthing the words. Madonna was a hell of a songwriter, how come she was never acknowledged for that part of her talent?

'You really like this stuff?' Charlie asked.

She wasn't sure whether he was referring to the grass or Madonna. 'I love it all,' she said, cleverly covering every base.

He stared at her long and hard, drawing deeply on the joint. 'Take the rest of your clothes off.'

'No,' she replied sharply, 'you take *your* clothes off.'

'It's not a pretty sight.'

'Turn off the lights.'

He offered her the joint. She took a long drag and threw herself on to the bed. 'I feel good,' she said, expelling a thin stream of smoke.

'You'll feel even better in a minute,' he said, moving on top of her.

She sighed, she'd heard it all before. 'Don't make promises you can't keep, Charlie.'

He was amused. 'Is that a challenge, kiddo?' he asked, fiddling with the buttons on her jeans. 'Cause I've never had any complaints.'

'Are you sure you're up to it?' she asked mockingly.

He grunted. 'Jesus, you got a smart mouth, show a little respect for the movie star.'

Rolling out from under him, she pulled off her boots and wriggled out of her jeans.

'No underwear, huh?' he said, raising extravagant eyebrows.

'Too restricting,' she said, kneeling on the bed totally naked and staring at him. 'Your turn.'

He began to laugh. 'You got a great bod, kiddo.'

'Thank you Mister Movie Star,' she said, reaching for his belt and expertly unbuckling. 'Can we get this train moving?'

'Got no reason to stall, babe.'

'How about a condom?'

'How about I don't take a shower with my boots on?'

'How about safe sex?'

'How about I just took a test and got the all clear.'

'How about I see the certificate?'

'How about shutting up?'

She acquiesced. She believed him. Besides, she was too stoned and too horny to argue.

Charlie Dollar was a terrific lover – surprisingly so. He wasn't in great shape, but he wasn't falling to pieces either. He knew all the moves and then some. He knew how to take her almost there and then stop seconds before the moment of no return. Timing. He had it down.

They made love a long time before either of them climaxed, and when they did it was a mutual release of such exquisite pleasure that Jordanna found herself crying out – unusual for her. Charlie let out a yell so loud she almost jumped out of bed.

The downside was he fell asleep almost immediately. And he snored. Loudly.

She got off the bed, gathered her clothes, and went into the bathroom. Charlie's bathroom resembled a busy pharmacy – there were rows of bottled pills to cure every ailment; jars of vitamins in all combinations; potions and powders and creams and solvents. She decided this would be a good place to be sick.

After taking a shower, she hurriedly dressed and emerged into the bedroom. Charlie was still snoring.

Without disturbing him she took off.

And so another one-night stand hit the freeway.

CHAPTER TWELVE



'Where are you?' Quincy asked, sounding annoyed.

'Across the street from Club Erotica on Hollywood Boulevard,' Michael replied, stubbing out his cigarette as he stood at a pay phone.

'So what's goin' on I should know about?'

'I got a lead,' Michael said. 'Rita left behind photos.'

'What photos?'

'Stop asking questions, and move your ass over here.'

'I gotta do this?'

'For me, Q.'

'OK, OK - I'll be there.'

'Club Erotica.'

'Sounds like a nice classy place.'

'Meet me at the bar,' Michael said, hanging up the phone and crossing the street.

A burly man guarding the door to Club Erotica announced it would cost him thirty bucks to gain entry. He parted with the money reluctantly and entered the club.

Oh, yes, this was Rita's kind of place all right. Dark and intimate, with plenty of weird-looking people in strange outfits and throbbing music blaring forth from multiple speakers.

A woman approached him wearing a peacock's mask and little else. 'What's your pleasure tonight?' she asked in a deep sultry voice.

'Huh?'

'Which room would you like to play in? Singles, group? Or perhaps the orgy room?'

It suddenly dawned on him that this was a sex club. Shit! He'd thought sex clubs were over in the seventies. 'Hey, I just wanna get a drink. Is there a bar around here?'

'There's the selection bar.'

'The *selection* bar?'

'Is this your first time here?'

'You got it.'

'OK, hon, you go sit in the selection bar, look around, and if there's anyone you care to be with, take them to the room of your choice.'

'How much does this cost?'

'Club Erotica is not a clip joint,' she said, quite indignant. 'You paid at the door, and unless you require special services, you're covered.'

'No special services.'

'Suit yourself. The bar's that way.'

He found the bar, walked in and slid on to a high stool.

The female bartender approached him. She wore a short black leather toga which barely covered her large bosom and ample ass. 'Cocktail?' she said, eyeing him up and down. 'I can make you the Club Erotica special.'

He wasn't interested but asked anyway. 'What's that?'

'Vodka, rum and orange juice, with a touch of Cointreau,' She winked. 'Guaranteed to keep your engine turning over.'

'You got non-alcoholic beer?'

'I might be able to find one.'

'Try hard,' he said, surveying the scene. Several women were gathered at the bar, all on the look-out for a suitable mate. A fat businessman accompanied by a chubby blonde sat at one of the small round tables clustered at the far end of the room, and two young men in shirt-sleeves and jeans hovered together over in a corner.

Oh, Rita, Rita, what brought you to a place like this?

Excitement. Rita was an excitement freak. Unfortunately

he'd never been able to satisfy her cravings, although their sex together had always been hot – physically there'd never been a problem.

The black-leather-toga woman returned with his drink, placing it in front of him.

'I got a question,' Michael said.

She leaned her elbows on the bar, her large breasts tipping towards him at an alarming angle. 'Me, too.'

'You first,' he said, taking a gulp of his non-alcoholic brew.

'What's a good-looking guy like you doing in a place like this?'

'My turn?'

'Shoot.'

'You know anyone called Heron Jones?'

'You're kidding? Right?'

'Not kidding.'

'Everyone knows Heron.'

'You want to enlighten me?'

She licked her lips eyeing him speculatively. 'You a cop?'

'Why would you ask that?'

'Cause you smell like a cop,' she said, smirking, as if she new something he didn't. 'Now don't get me wrong,' she added, 'I got a yen for that cop smell.'

Ignoring her knowing look he kept going. 'So how come everybody knows Heron Jones?'

'Cause he's famous.'

'Not famous enough for me to have heard of him.'

She threw back her head and laughed. 'Heron Jones has the biggest dick in captivity. And he brings it here three nights a week and shows it off in the private room. Anybody wanting to use his . . . services . . . pays big. But, honey, you don't look like you'd be interested in a *guy's* services.'

He pulled out a picture of Rita, not the Polaroid, but a good shot he'd taken on their honeymoon. 'You ever seen this woman in here?'

She took the picture and studied it for a while. 'Y'know, honey, I honestly don't remember them unless they're like

Heron and have something special to offer. Take a look around this place . . . they come, they go, who cares?

'So you don't recognize her?'

'Maybe she was here.'

'How long ago?'

'She your girlfriend?'

'Ex-wife.'

'Coupla months, I'm not sure.'

He showed her the Polaroid of the man. 'Is this Heron Jones?'

'Oooh, *baby*, you could get arrested for carrying *this* around.' She gazed at the Polaroid and began giggling. 'Yeah, that's Heron all right. The King of the monster cockadoodledoo! He sure inherited *big*.'

'Is he here tonight?'

'You can catch him in the private room. I promise you — it's a real sight.'

One of the women was edging along the bar towards him with a determined expression. She finally reached her destination. 'I'm choosing *you*,' she announced, placing a well-manicured hand firmly on his arm.

'Excuse me?' he said, backing away.

She was all over him. 'Tonight. You, me — a very. . . *sexual* experience.'

'I'm on probation,' he said, standing up.

She looked confused. 'What?'

'It's complicated. Pick somebody else.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Quincy pulled up outside Club Erotica wondering what Michael had gotten him into now. Amber was not pleased. They'd just been sitting down to get cozy and listen to a little Luther Vandross on the stereo when Michael had called.

'Gotta go,' Quincy said, as soon as he'd hung up.

'Why?' Amber demanded, already looking mad.

'Cause Mike needs me.'

'Can't he do anything by himself?'

Mike got a lotta history between us. His *kid* is missing. Be a little understanding, baby. Think about what *you'd* do if one of *our* kids was missing.'

Amber was a soft touch, she'd caved in without too much of a fight.

He'd kissed her, taken off, and now he was standing outside this sleazy clip joint.

The jerk at the door refused to let him in until he handed over thirty bucks cash. Thirty freaking bucks! Mike owed him big time.

Once inside he went straight to the bar. Michael wasn't there. He approached the amazon in black leather stationed behind the bar. 'Somebody leave a message for me?' he enquired.

'Blonde, brunette?'

'Male. Good-looking.'

'Oh,' she said. 'You a cop, too?'

How come they always remembered Michael? 'Where is he?'

'In the men's room.'

'Thanks.'

Quincy entered the john just as Michael was zipping up. 'This is some dump you dragged me to,' he complained. 'What's the story?'

'I came across some pictures and a note. She'd written down this club and the name of a guy. Rita's around somewhere, I got a feeling.'

Shaking his head, Quincy said, 'You an' your feelings - it always leads to trouble.'

'I gotta find my kid, Q.'

'I know.'

'Rita's into something. I don't want Bella exposed to it.'

'So why are we here?'

'We're waiting for Heron Jones to finish.'

'Finish what?'

'Making out with a line of women. In case you hadn't guessed, this is a sex club.'

Quincy let out a long low whistle. 'Jeez!' he said. 'Just what I need to go home an' tell Amber. She'll go nutso.'

'Not if you keep it to yourself.'

'Amber an' me, we don't have secrets.'

'Maybe now's the time to start.'

Quincy wrinkled his nose. 'So who's this Heron Jones, a male hooker?'

'The club pays him to perform here. He services as many women as will pay the hundred bucks to see him.'

'What is he - Superman?'

'Kinda.'

'And the story is we gotta hang out until he finishes?'

'That's it.'

'Shit, Mike, nothin' with you is ever easy.'

By the time Heron Jones emerged through the back entrance it was past midnight. Michael and Quincy were waiting in the parking lot. They used the element of surprise, approaching him from either side.

'Let's talk,' Michael said.

Heron eyeballed them, trying to decide whether to make a run for it or not. No way. He was sure they were cops, the fuckers had the attitude. Squaring his shoulders he went for the innocent pitch. 'Listen, guys, whatever ya wanna stick me with, I didn't do it, OK? Every time there's a freakin' robbery in this neighbourhood you're on my case. I'm straight now, guys. I'm *screwin'* for a living - what more do y'want?'

'Whyn't we take it over here,' Michael said, grabbing his arm and hustling him in the direction of a streetlight.

'Whaddaya want from me?' Heron grumbled, making an unsuccessful attempt to shake free. 'I ain't done shit, man. Y'can ask anyone.'

Michael thrust one of the Polaroids in front of his face. 'You know this woman?'

Heron took a quick glance. 'They all look the same in the dark.'

'Take another look,' Michael said menacingly. 'You recognize her or not?'

'Dunno.'

'Do you?' Michael said, pinning his arm behind him in a vice-like grip.

'Yeah, I know her,' Heron said sulkily. 'So freakin' what?'

'Who is she?'

'Some bimbo used to come to the club.'

'What happened to her?'

'Why?' Heron asked, his lips twisting in a sneer. 'Is the douche bag dead?'

Michael spun him around. 'You know something we don't?'

Heron threw up his hands. 'OK, OK. I don't know nothin' bout her 'cept I got her a job in the movies.'

'What movies?'

'*Mary Poppins*, what d'ya think?'

'Are we talking porno here?' Quincy interjected, waving his arms in the air.

'I didn't force her to do nothin',' Heron said sullenly. 'This road got off on performin'.'

Michael slammed him against the side of the brick wall. 'Where is she now?'

'Man, you're hurtin' me,' Heron complained.

'You listening, asshole? *Where the fuck is she?*'

'Dunno,' Heron whined. 'Who gives a shit? I don't...'

Before he could finish Michael swung back and whacked him hard across the mouth.

'Aw, sweet Jesus,' Quincy groaned.

'You feel like answering me now?' Michael demanded.

Heron reached up, gingerly touching his face. 'She's livin' with a producer - only you didn't hear it from me.'

'What's his name?'

'Some old guy calls himself Daly Forrest.'

'Where's he live?'

'Look him up in the phone book. All those producer dudes are listed. I think you broke my freakin' tooth.'

'When I find him, she'd better be there,' Michael said threateningly. 'Or we'll be back. And next time it'll be more than your tooth. Now get outta my sight.'

Heron ran off to his truck without a backward glance. He might be a big man in the bedroom but his balls didn't travel well.

'You're gonna get us in major trouble,' Quincy said wearily. 'You can't go around pretending we're cops. I got a private investigator business I gotta protect.'

'What's the matter, you think he'll file a complaint?'

'No, Mike. I'm just saying we gotta be careful.'

'All I'm interested in is finding my kid.'

'I know that.'

'OK, so I do what it takes. Let's go run a check with the DMV, find out who this Daly Forrest is and get his address.'

'Sure, Mike.'

'And after that we'll pay him a little visit.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Daly Forrest lived in an expensive high-rise on Wilshire. The porter at the desk stopped them in the lobby and asked who they were visiting.

'Daly Forrest,' Michael said, flashing his badge.

The porter was duly impressed. 'Fourteenth floor. Apartment 1403.'

'Thanks,' Michael said, adding as an afterthought, 'oh, and be sure you don't announce us.'

The porter nodded, only too happy to oblige.

'Somebody's gonna bust our sweet asses,' Quincy muttered as they marched through the marble foyer. 'I'm telling you, Mike, we can't keep getting away with this crap. Bury that fuckin' badge of yours, it ain't legal here.'

'It ain't legal in New York either, but so what?' Sometimes he got off on taking it to the edge, especially when he had a purpose.

They rode up in the elevator with a smartly dressed woman clutching a small Pekinese dog under one arm. She gave them an upright rich-woman-being-gracious smile. Thin scarlet lips, white stretched skin and capped teeth. She got off on the tenth floor.

'How come women always smile at you?' Quincy asked, poking his gums with a toothpick.

'Anyone ever told you you ask dumb questions?'

'It's 'cause you're such a handsome sonofabitch,' Quincy mumbled enviously. 'Me - I got the personality. You got the looks. Lucky asshole.'

There were only two apartments on the fourteenth floor. Daly Forrest's had a red lacquered door and a shiny brass knocker.

'Seems he had an urge to smarten the place up,' Quincy remarked, rubbing the door with his thumb to see if the paint came off.

Michael pressed the buzzer, waited a few minutes then pushed again.

When Daly Forrest finally appeared he was not what either of them expected. He was an older distinguished-looking man, with a shock of white hair, a snow-white goatee beard and wire-rimmed steel spectacles. He wore a paisley silk robe with a tasselled sash and black velvet monogrammed slippers. He did not have the look of a man who produced porno films.

'Can I help you?' he said, speaking in a clipped English accent.

'Daly Forrest?' Michael asked politely.

'That's correct. I repeat, can I help you, gentlemen?'

'We're investigating a case.'

'Did something take place in the building?'

'That's right,' Michael said. 'We need witnesses.'

'I've been home all evening,' Daly replied. 'I doubt I can be a witness.'

'And your companion?' Michael asked, trying to see past him into the apartment.

'What companion?' Daly asked, standing firm at the door.

'Rita Polone.'

'Miss Polone is not here,' Daly said, stroking his goatee. 'Furthermore, she does not live here. What gave you the impression she did?'

'The case we're investigating,' Michael said, speaking slowly, 'involves Miss Polone.'

'In what way?' Daly enquired, not pleased with this intrusion on his privacy in the middle of the night.

'We need to talk to her,' Michael replied, getting an uncomfortable feeling about this man.

Daly stared them down, cold as an Arctic winter. 'I repeat - she's not here.' His hand was on the door, ready to close it.

'So, all we need is her address and we'll be on our way,' Quincy said, sensing this jerk was going to cause them trouble.

'Let me see your identification,' Daly said, suddenly getting nasty.

Michael didn't take a beat. 'Certainly,' he said, reaching into his jacket and flashing his badge.

Daly Forrest was no fool. 'That's a New York City Detective's badge,' he said sharply.

Still unfazed, Michael said, 'Yeah, we're working on an out-of-state case.'

Eyes steely behind his wire-rimmed spectacles, Daly said, 'I wish to check with your captain, kindly give me his number.'

Quincy was starting to get fidgety. 'Tell you what, whyn't we come back,' he said, cracking his knuckles - a nervous habit which drove Michael nuts.

Daly glared at them both. 'I suggest you don't,' he said, slamming the door in their faces.

'Goddamn it!' Michael said furiously.

'Let's get outta here,' Quincy suggested. 'Before he calls the real cops.'

'He knows where she is,' Michael muttered, almost to himself.

'Yeah, an' he ain't telling us.'

'He will.'

'Not tonight.'

'We'll see.'

'Mike,' Quincy pleaded. 'Tomorrow is another day.'
Michael turned on him angrily. 'No shit?'



Early in the morning Michael was back without Quincy, who was busy working on a blackmail case for a studio honcho. He parked across the street staking a prime spot for himself, enabling him to watch all the comings and goings from Daly Forrest's building.

He'd slept fitfully, knowing that today he was finally going to find out where Rita was. How he hated her for taking his kid and putting him through this. As soon as he found her he planned on consulting a lawyer to see if he could get full custody of Bella.

Yeah, and how was he going to pay for it? He had to rent an apartment, hire a part-time nanny, and God knew what else.

Major priority – get a steady job. Quincy had offered him a partnership in his PI business, and it wasn't such a bad idea. They were a good team, and Quincy had assured him that working for the studios was nice and easy – nothing life-threatening like their days in New York. He was considering it. After all, he had a year to make up his mind whether he wanted to go back to New York or stay in LA.

I need a drink.

The thought nagged at his subconscious, forcing him to pay attention. Almost immediately he felt a dryness in his throat and the urgent desire to down something cold and alcoholic.

Christ! This was not good. He'd been sober almost four years and he didn't need to be thinking about breaking the pattern of sobriety. Although he *did* think about it. Once in a while. When things got tough and he knew there was an easy answer to dull the pain.

The good thing was that the programme had taught him to be smart enough to know it was the wrong answer and

would eventually destroy him if he succumbed. It was about time he got himself to a meeting.

It hadn't been easy getting sober and there was no way he was going to blow it – however strong the temptation.

Lighting a cigarette he desperately tried to curb his subconscious, choosing to think only positive thoughts. Had to work the programme again, he hadn't attended a meeting in months. He needed validation.

Daly Forrest emerged at ten forty-five and got into a chauffeur-driven Lexus.

Michael followed the car as it left the driveway and sped along Wilshire going towards downtown.

Early in the morning he'd had a friend in the department in New York run a check on Mr Forrest. He'd found out that Daly was a sixty-three-year-old naturalized American who'd lived in LA for fifteen years. During that time he'd written and produced a slew of soft-core porn films, moving into the real thing three years ago. He wasn't doing anything illegal, but he was dangerously close. Two years earlier he'd been arrested in a dramatic case involving an imported snuff movie, but the prosecution were unable to prove he was sufficiently connected and he'd gotten off.

Daly had no wife, no family and he was rich. That's all Michael knew. It was enough to scare him. Rita was a wild card, a wealthy man like Daly Forrest could persuade her to do anything.

He followed the Lexus all the way to Hancock Park, slowing down while he watched it pull into the driveway of a large house on a quiet side-street. Daly emerged from his car, spoke to his driver for a few moments, then sent the car away. He entered the house with a key, slamming the door behind him.

Michael parked across the street and sat in his car for five minutes before getting out and approaching the house.

It was a beautiful morning, no smog and the birds were singing. The front porch of the house was alive with a breathtaking display of purple and orange bougainvillea. A

skinny black cat slunk around the corner and vanished from sight.

Instead of approaching the front door Michael decided to follow the cat around to the rear, keeping an eye out for anyone watching him.

He had that gut feeling again, like something was about to happen he couldn't quite control.

The night he'd gotten shot he'd had that same feeling, and what should have been a simple drug bust had ended up with him nearly dying. He'd never forget *that* night.

Moving stealthily, he reached the surprisingly large and well-landscaped back garden. Several swaying palm trees overshadowed him.

The door to the kitchen was open and he could hear a child's voice.

His heart soared, he felt certain it was Bella.

He edged forward, getting closer to the open door. He thought he saw the back of a little girl.

Relief flooded through him, he'd found his daughter and nothing would ever separate them again.

As he took another step forward something smashed down on to his head and he descended into blackness.

The last thing he heard was a child's scream.

The Man kept a scrapbook. Every so often he took it out and added to the contents. He'd bought scissors and double-sided tape at Thrifty's, and worked on his scrapbook diligently whenever he had something new to add to his collection of clippings.

The woman in Agoura Hills did not rate as much newspaper space as he'd hoped, and that made him angry. He knew that to get the attention he craved he would have to start leaving a strong message so they would know exactly who they were dealing with.

He thought about it for days. What would Steven Seagal do? How would the mighty movie star handle such a dilemma?

The Man honestly didn't know.

The other night, a woman living in the house had attempted to talk to him. He'd immediately tried to put a stop to her inane chatter, but it didn't seem to prevent her from accosting him whenever she could.

'I'm an actress,' she'd informed him. 'What do you do?'

'Businessman,' he'd replied, not looking her in the eye as they'd stood awkwardly in the front hallway.

'What kind of business?' she'd asked.

He'd walked away from her without replying.

His rudeness didn't seem to bother her, because whenever she saw him she acted as if they were old friends. Yesterday she'd stopped him on the way to his car. 'It's funny,' she'd said cheerfully, 'we live in the same house and I don't even know your name.'

He was forced to reply. 'John,' he'd lied.

'John what?' she'd asked, edging closer.

John Seagal,' he'd replied, backing off.

She'd smirked coquettishly. 'Don't you want to know my name?'

He'd had no desire to know her name, but she'd told him anyway. 'Shelley. That's with an "ey". When I make it big you can say you knew me when.'

Would-be actresses. They were everywhere in Hollywood. They littered the streets. They filled the clubs. They drove on the freeways. Their hungry eyes watching ... wanting ... waiting ...

If it wasn't for that bitch of an actress who'd lured him with her tantalizing smile, and her bouncy tits and her long yellow hair, he'd never have lost seven years of his life.

Pulling aside one of the black-out blinds that now covered his windows he peeked out, watching the maid as she trudged wearily down the path carrying a heavy sackload of garbage. She stayed away from him now. He had her trained not to go near his room.

His solitary existence suited him fine as long as he had everything he needed. A bed, television, VCR machine, a stack of movies, and his dreams of the future.

The future would be a better place when he'd dealt with the scum who'd so foolishly betrayed him. The female scum. They had to learn a lesson. A harsh lesson perhaps, but there was no other way.

It was time to check off the second name on his list. Six women altogether. Five to go.

It was an exciting game and he was enjoying playing it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



'No, Rosa, absolutely *not*,' Kennedy said, cradling the phone under her chin. 'I refuse to subject myself to one more blind date.'

'But Kennedy,' Rosa pleaded, in her usual *you've-got-to-do-me-this-one-big-favour* voice. 'Look what happened last time. You ended up enjoying yourself – I mean *really* enjoying yourself. What's so bad about that?'

True. Her one night with Nix had been memorable, but it was not something she wished to repeat.

'Nothing,' she said, 'I simply have no desire to do it again. Besides, I have to work.'

'What work?'

'I'm writing the *Style Wars* piece on Bobby Rush.'

Now she had Rosa's interest. 'Did you interview him?'

'Sort of.'

'What's he like?'

'He's OK,' she said. 'In fact, he's really a nice guy for an actor.'

'Does he have a girlfriend?' Rosa pressed, dying to find out everything.

'We didn't get into his personal life.'

Rosa was disappointed. 'Why not? That's what all your women readers will want to know.'

'Rosa,' Kennedy said patiently. 'You present the news *your* way, and I'll do my interviewing *my* way.'

'So you won't come with us tomorrow night?'

On Sunday, the long drive to the nursing home in Ag Hills gave Kennedy plenty of time to think. With the *Be* Rush profile on its way to New York via *Federal Express* could now concentrate on the first big story she planned to write for *Style Wars*.

Living in Los Angeles, the movie industry was a timely subject. Women on film. Women and violence. Women in Hollywood. Equality or sexism? Who's winning?

She'd been considering the women with power in Hollywood, and the two she most wanted to interview were Si Lansing, currently the boss at Paramount, and Lucky Sargento, a woman with major clout who owned and ran Paramount Studios. Under Lucky's ownership, the studio was producing some pretty interesting movies depicting women as people, instead of merely the girlfriend or the whore.

Kennedy knew there were many directions she could take. The battle had been written countless times before, but in her way. Maybe if she wrote a powerful enough piece it could influence a few of the so-called Hollywood executives to change their sexist ways.

Hal! Extremely wishful thinking.

She decided to call Mason in the morning and discuss it with him. He had good instincts, and it was essential that her first real story for *Style Wars* made an impact.



Nurse Linford, a middle-aged black woman in her forties with a huge bosom, mischievous smile and a crush on Kennedy's father, greeted her at reception. 'Your daddy's an incorrigible flirtin' dog!' she said, beaming. 'An' the truth of the matter is I enjoy every second of his bad-boy behaviour!'

Kennedy had never considered her father to be either a bad boy or a flirt. It was obvious there was another side to the studious professor of literature she'd grown up with. He'd always been a wonderful and caring father, and even though she was an only child, neither of her parents had ever allowed her to feel lonely. Every summer they'd travelled extensively together, exploring Europe and exposing her to all kinds of different cultures. At nine she was reading Dickens; at twelve Trollope and Dostoevsky; and by fourteen she was into Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. She'd certainly experienced a rounded education.

Nurse Linford led her into her father's room. He sat on top of the bed, a smile on his face, a pile of books on the bedside table and a notepad of paper balanced on his lap, pen poised. He was always jotting down notes with the intention of writing another book. He'd already published three academic studies and now he was planning a fourth.

Kennedy gave him a hug and a kiss. 'How are you doing, Dad?' she asked warmly, thinking he looked thinner and more gaunt than last time she'd visited.

'How would *you* be doing if you were stuck in a nursing home?' he said, sounding cross but not really meaning it. He'd accepted his fate with as good a grace as he could muster.

'Not as well as you,' she replied.

'Take no notice of his complaining,' Nurse Linford said, clucking her tongue. 'He's a grouchy old boy today.'

'I never complain,' her father said indignantly. 'If I die, you'd be the first to hear me.'

'I'm sure about that,' Nurse Linford replied, adjusting his bedcovers. 'How about taking a walk around the garden with your daughter? It's a beautiful day out there.'

'An excellent idea, nurse,' he agreed. He wasn't bedridden, it was just that the pain was so intense that most of the time he was hooked up to a morphine drip to relieve his suffering.

'I'll set you up with your portable power pack,' Nurse Linford said, fussing around him as she helped him off the bed. 'That'll keep you going for a while.'

'You keep me going, nurse,' he said, wincing with pain as he straightened up.

Nurse Linford favoured him with her mischievous smile. 'You'd better believe it!'

Once outside, Kennedy and he strolled slowly around the well-kept grounds arm in arm.

'Tell me, dear, what have you been up to?' he asked.

'I abandoned the book I was working on. And since I needed money, I'm writing for *Style Wars* - you know, the magazine.'

'Of course I know the magazine,' he said irritably. 'I may be in the hospital but I haven't stopped living.'

'I didn't think it was your kind of literature.'

'*Everything* is my kind of literature,' he said gruffly. 'That's what makes the world go round.'

'You taught me that when I was five.'

'I'm glad you remember,' he said, with the glimmer of a smile.

'Anyway,' she continued, 'I have to write six celebrity profiles, and at the same time I get to write six other pieces on any subject I care to cover.'

'Sounds challenging.'

'That's what attracted me to the assignment. I was considering writing an exposé on the way men treat women in the industry. What do you think?'

'If you can make it fresh.'

'Trust me, Dad, I can make it fresh.'

He squeezed her hand tightly. 'I'm sure you can, You can do whatever you set your mind to.'

It was a good feeling knowing her parents had believed in her. They'd taught her well, infusing ambition, spirit and energy. The result of their nurture that she'd grown up full of confidence. They could have given her a greater gift.

'So, what else has been going on?' she asked lightly. 'Linford still chasing you around the room?'

'Nurse Linford is taking a self-defence course, with a chuckle.

'To protect herself against you?'

His gaunt face turned serious. 'There was a murder in the neighbourhood not too long ago.'

'What happened?'

'A woman was strangled outside her house.'

'I was under the impression this was a fairly safe area.'

'It usually is, that's why everybody's alarmed. Nurses are taking a self-defence course.'

'I can't imagine anyone trying to attack Nurse Linford. She'd crush them like a bug!'

He laughed drily. 'Yes, she certainly would.' For a moment before adding, 'That's what you should be worried about.'

'What? Nurse Linford and her amazing strength?'

No, dear. Write about the woman who was murdered.'

'She's not news. The magazine wouldn't be interested in her.'

Her father stopped short and gave her a withering look. 'I'll pretend you never said that. Not news is a woman who was strangled outside her own home. What's more, it's not news to happen to her before she becomes newsworthy.'

'You're right,' she said quickly, suitably chastised. 'I'm glad you think so.'

Sunday morning Bobby rolled out of bed, forcing himself to get dressed and go jogging. He'd only had a few hours sleep, hanging out at Homebase Central until three in the morning. Several beautiful girls had tried to persuade him that they were the perfect companion to take home for a night of passion. He'd resisted all advances.

Gary had tried to encourage him. 'Go for it,' he'd urged. 'When it comes to pussy – *never* turn it down.'

'I'm not interested in one-nighters,' he'd said, and meant it. He considered himself past the *let's-get-laid-just-because-I-can* stage. There had to be more to life than sex with a stranger. He was looking for a meaningful relationship with a female who was not an actress. Most actresses were a nightmare – insecure, narcissistic, demanding, fragile. His last two semi-serious flings had been with actresses. Never again.

Jogging along the UCLA track he worked up a heavy sweat. Then he went home, dived into his swimming-pool, swam fifty lengths, got out, squeezed a glass of fresh orange juice, grabbed the *L.A. Times* and lay out by the pool on a comfortable *chaise*.

It occurred to him that maybe he'd call the woman who'd come for the interview. What was her name? Ah yes, Kennedy something or other. Kennedy Chase, that was it.

He thought about her for a moment – cool, attractive and very together.

It then occurred to him he didn't have her number, so he phoned his secretary at home.

'Beth, did you pre-interview Kennedy Chase?' he asked.

There was a long pause. 'Uh . . . no,' she said, sounding puzzled. 'Should I have?'

'Sure you should. She's an attractive woman, but not suitable for the job at all. By the way, what's her phone number?'

'I don't have it.'

'Why not?'

'Bobby, Elspeth handles press, she is your publicist.'

'What's Elspeth got to do with this?'

'Kennedy Chase,' Beth replied patiently. 'Your interview with her is now scheduled for ten o'clock on Monday.'

'Beth, help me out here, I'm confused. I interviewed her on Friday.'

'*You* interviewed *her*?'

'That's what you set up, isn't it?'

'No.'

He was getting impatient. 'If *you* didn't set it up, who did?'

'There's obviously some confusion here, Bobby. Kennedy Chase is the journalist from *Style Wars*. She's doing the story on you to go with the cover photograph.'

'*Shit!*'

'According to your latest schedule she's due to interview you Monday at ten a.m. And Elspeth has promised her she can hang in the background for the rest of the day observing. I thought you agreed to this.'

'I suppose I must have,' he muttered, knowing he'd been taken.

'Do you still want me to get you her number? I can call Elspeth, I'm sure she'll have it.'

'Don't bother,' he said, hanging up.

Of course, it all made sense now, a case of mistaken identity, and Kennedy, good little journalist that she obviously was, had taken full advantage of the situation.

He couldn't wait until tomorrow morning. He would show Ms Chase a thing or two. Oh yeah, *really*.



Kennedy drove home thinking about murder and ageing and disease and pain. All the good things. By the time she reached her apartment she was ready to call Rosa and yell *Yes! Yes! I'm coming out with you. I don't care who he is! Bring him to me - naked and horny!*

Wisdom prevailed and she didn't. Instead she heated a can of vegetable soup, sipped it slowly, took a leisurely bath, and got into bed with the latest Elmore Leonard novel — his wonderfully vivid crime books were her weakness. Thoroughly relaxed she fell asleep dreaming of Florida con men and colourful losers.

In the morning she felt better. She had no intention of keeping her appointment to interview Bobby Rush, she'd already finished the piece and sent it to Mason. She also had no intention of informing his rude publicist — let the woman find out the hard way.

At around ten thirty her phone started ringing. She allowed the machine to pick up and listened in.

One desperate publicist.

Good.

The woman called four times between ten thirty and noon. Finally she gave up.

Kennedy decided to go to the beach. After all, this was California and it was a gorgeous clear day.

She left her apartment feeling in a great mood. Putting the top down on her Corvette, she drove down the twisting curves of Sunset to the ocean.

When she got back around four there were several messages on her machine. Rosa, of course; Bobby Rush — that was a surprise; Mason, who said he had to talk to her about the piece; and finally a sad-sounding Nurse Linford. 'Kennedy, dear . . . I don't know how to say this . . . your father . . . he died late this afternoon. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.'

Kennedy gazed blankly at her answering machine and somehow or other fell back into a chair.

Her eyes filled with tears, slowly they trickled down her cheeks.

Now she was completely and utterly alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



'You *fucked* Charlie Dollar?' Cheryl exclaimed incredulously, as she and Jordanna strolled through Fred Segal checking out the new Gaultier and Montana lines.

'It's not so difficult,' Jordanna said huffily. 'After all, he *is* a man.'

'He's also on Donna's list of clients,' Cheryl said, relishing the fact she had inside information. 'He orders up a little professional action once in a while.'

Jordanna couldn't help feeling disappointed. 'He does?'

'Two girls. Always blondes. Mister Movie Star is into watching.'

Jordanna hated the fact that Cheryl now considered herself an expert on everybody's sex life. She wished she hadn't confided about her one-nighter with Charlie.

'So . . . what's he like in bed?' Cheryl asked curiously, grabbing a black leather bustier off the rail and holding it up against herself.

'Why don't you check it out with one of your blondes?' Jordanna replied tartly.

'Hmm . . . jealous?' Cheryl teased, posing in front of the mirror.

Jordanna narrowed her eyes. 'It doesn't suit you.'

'And being jealous doesn't suit *you*,' Cheryl retorted, throwing the bustier down.

'I am *not* jealous,' Jordanna said, furious that Cheryl thought she was. 'Charlie can sleep with who he likes. I have absolutely *no* plans to see him again.'

A sly smile slid across Cheryl's face. 'Hasn't called or lousy fuck?'

'Neither,' Jordanna said, closing the subject as they moved over to the shoe section. She picked up a Chanel black suede boot and pretended to study it while she thought about Charlie. How *did* she feel? She certainly hadn't fallen for him if that's the impression Cheryl was under. But a man who liked watching women get it on together . . . ugh . . . *major* turn-off. And she'd slept with him, just like that.

God, he probably considered her just another dumb star fuck. How humiliating.

A week had passed and he hadn't called. Not that she wanted him to. Not that she'd given him her number.

Screw Charlie Dollar — the last thing she needed was movie star in her life.

'Have you heard from your father?' Cheryl asked, picking up a Walter Steiger pump.

'No.'

'Is he still paying your allowance?'

'The bank hasn't called. I'm sure they'd be throwing a shit fit if I was bouncing cheques.'

'Well . . . if you need a top-paying job . . . you know who to come to.'

Jordanna stifled a giggle as she thought about it. Jordanna Levitt. High-class hooker. Daddy couldn't be *too* mad, after all, he'd married one.

Shep was in a pissy mood when she got back to his house. 'When are you moving out?' he asked, lips pursed, a frown on his handsome face.

'Why? Am I bothering you?' she retorted defensively. 'Cause if I am I'll pack up and go.'

'You assured me it would only be a few days,' he reminded her.

'I told you, I'll move out now.'

'You're so *messy*,' Shep complained, gesturing at magazines

littered on the floor, shoes and clothes scattered all around, and dirty ashtrays sitting on every surface.

'I'm sorry,' she said tartly. 'I didn't realize I was living with Mister House-proud.'

Shep bent to pick up a magazine. 'My maid only comes in twice a week,' he said accusingly, 'and instead of pressing my shirts and doing things for me, she's busy clearing up after you.'

She'd heard enough of his complaining. 'OK, OK, I get it, I'm out of here,' she said, wishing he'd shut up and leave her alone.

'You can go back to your own place,' he suggested helpfully, reaching for another magazine thrown carelessly on the floor. 'I'm sure Jordan will be glad to have you there again.'

She hated it when anyone told her what she should do, especially Shep, who was so busy lurking in the closet he had no right to give advice. Without replying she marched into the small guest room, grabbed a suitcase and began stuffing it with her clothes.

Shep appeared in the doorway and stood there watching her. 'You don't have to leave tonight,' he said, managing to sound hurt.

Oh, yes, *fine*. He'd told her to get out and now he trying to play the concerned friend. Well, it was too late. 'Thank you, but I'd prefer to,' she said frostily.

Shep was not into rejection. 'Jordy, don't be mad at me said, trying to bring her around.

'I'm not,' she said, continuing to throw things into suitcase. 'As a matter of fact I was just about to tell you.'

'Tell me what?' he asked anxiously.

Yeah, tell him what? She thought fast and came up with good one.

'Charlie Dollar asked me to move in with him,' she lied. Shep's surprise was evident. 'Charlie Dollar?'

You got it.'

so now she sat in her car with nowhere to spend the night. She refused to go home – no way would she give her father the satisfaction of seeing her return to the guest house. Quickly she checked off the alternatives. Staying with Cheryl was questionable now she was in the hooker business. Marjory had just moved back in with her father on account of the threatening letters she'd been receiving. And Grant probably had hot and cold girls running all night long. Of course, she could always check into a hotel, but that seemed such a lonely thing to do.

On impulse she drove her car in the direction of Charlie Dollar's house.



It was seven o'clock and Mac Brooks knew it was time to go home because Sharleen had informed him early in the morning there was an important charity event they were supposed to attend that evening.

The truth was he didn't feel like leaving the production office. He was perfectly happy sitting around with Bobby, Gary and Tyrone, discussing script changes, casting, locations and all the planning that went into the months of pre-production on a movie – in this case only six weeks because they were on an accelerated schedule.

Casting was of paramount importance. Mac liked every role to be perfect – from the star to the extras, he needed the actor playing the role to be exactly right. It was reassuring to find out that Bobby felt the same way. He was also adamant about hiring his regular crew – people he'd used on most of his movies. His cinematographer was available, and his first assistant. Plus the production designer he favoured and his location manager. Soon all the other people would be in place, everyone from props to wardrobe.

He'd received bad news about the woman who usually headed his make-up team. She'd been murdered, somewhere in Agoura Hills near where she lived. Christ! The violence out on the streets today was lethal. He would miss Margarita,

and worked with him on four movies. He'd sent a huge white wreath and did not attend the funeral. He didn't believe in funerals — when someone was gone that was it, keep only the sweet memories.

Having spent a week with Bobby, Mac was pleasantly surprised — he'd known he'd be professional, but he hadn't expected to like Bobby as much as he did. Gary and Tyrone were great to work with too.

Making movies and having fun at the same time was the best experience you could possibly have. Who needed home life when work was all consuming?

The phone rang and Gary handed it to him.

It was Sharleen. Naturally. 'Where *are* you?' she wailed, sounding upset.

'You know where I am,' he replied patiently.

'We have to leave the house in twenty minutes.'

'I'll meet you there.'

There was a quaver in her voice, 'Mac —'

'Yes?'

'It's black tie. I reminded you this morning.'

'So?'

She was trying to be nice in the hope that he'd come running. 'So that means you'll have to stop home and change before you meet me.'

'I know.'

Nice wasn't working. She snapped. It didn't take much. 'You sonofabitch! You're not coming, are you?'

'I'll make it if I can.' But he had no intention of doing so. Slam. Down went the phone.

Christ! Women!

'Trouble?' Bobby asked casually.

'Nothing I can't handle,' Mac replied. 'You ever been married, Bobby?'

A big grin. 'Hey, I might be an actor, but an idiot I'm not!'

When Charlie Dollar wasn't working on a movie he indulged himself — doing exactly what pleased him. Sometimes he didn't get out of bed until noon, and then he'd emerge from his bedroom and wander around the house in his black silk pyjamas and white tube socks, playing ball with his dogs, reading a variety of books, eating tuna-fish sandwiches and watching videos of classic movies or reruns of *Taxi* — his personal favourite.

Around five he was into his receiving mood. Usually friends dropped by and hung out, smoking grass and drinking margaritas. Charlie got off on holding court, expounding his theories on every subject to anyone who'd listen. They all listened, because he was Charlie Dollar, superstar, and this was Hollywood. If you were lucky enough to be in the great man's inner circle, you listened good.

Jordanna turned up in the middle of one of his entertaining sessions. His housekeeper, Mrs Willet, a brusque Welsh-woman, answered the door, thought she was a fan, and attempted to get rid of her.

'Excuse me,' Jordanna said, pushing past her with a determined expression. 'Mr Dollar is expecting me.'

'Really?' Mrs Willet said, in hot pursuit. 'We'll see about that, young missy.'

'Allow me to jog your memory,' Jordanna said imperiously. 'Madonna, Prince. Outside his bedroom door in the middle of the night.'

Mrs Willet knew when to retreat. Making a rude snorting noise she stalked off.

'Old bag,' Jordanna muttered, opening the door to the living room and marching boldly in.

Charlie lazed on the couch smoking a joint. Arnie stood behind the bar fixing margaritas. Melinda Woodson sprawled on the floor wearing black leather and wraparound dark glasses, her expression sour as usual.

The two dogs rushed over to greet Jordanna, sniffed her crotch and quickly retreated when Charlie snapped his fingers. 'Kiddo!' he exclaimed, beaming. 'You don't believe in returning phone calls?'

'Huh?'

'Alexander Graham Bell. I've called you three times.' He stood up, treating her to his slightly off-centre crazed grin. 'Ejection is not good for movie stars. We ain't used to it, kiddo. We get kinda pissed.'

'I didn't know you called,' she said, realizing that since she'd moved out of the guest house she hadn't checked her machine.

Arnie had been watching this exchange with a bitter expression as the love of his life re-entered Charlie's. Stepping out from behind the bar he immediately said the wrong thing. 'Levitt. You look tired.'

She barely glanced in his direction. 'Thanks, Arnie, you always know how to make a girl feel her best.'

Charlie caught the friction in the air and knew just the way to defuse it. 'Arnie and Melinda were on their way outta here,' he announced.

Both looked at him with surprise – this was news to them.

Charlie took Jordanna's hand in his. 'Come up to the bedroom, kiddo, I got something to show you I think you'll appreciate.'

Melinda and Arnie exchanged looks. Charlie was usually so laid-back, it was unlike him to exhibit this kind of interest in a woman.

Arnie wasn't going quietly. 'Thought you were coming to the club tonight, Charlie,' he said in a whining voice.

'Maybe not,' Charlie said mysteriously, and with that he led Jordanna upstairs.

She was flattered and confused – both unusual emotions for her. She certainly hadn't expected Charlie to be this pleased to see her, and yet it was nice that he was.

'How've you been, kiddo?' he asked, as they entered his chaotic bedroom hand in hand.

'Not great,' she replied listlessly.

'How come?'

She shrugged. 'Nothing important.'

He turned her so that she faced him. 'If

Sure. She was back in his life and the first place he dragged her to was his bedroom. It wasn't listening he had in mind.

'I repeat, nothing important.'

Swooping down, he picked up two Tower Records bags stashed in a corner and handed them to her. 'Presents,' he said, with a big wide grin. 'Thought I'd wasted my money, but here you are in person. See if I did good.'

She peered into the first bag – it was jammed with every tape and CD Madonna and Prince had ever made. The second bag contained Bobby Brown and Coltrane. For a moment she almost lost it. This was thoughtful shit, she wasn't used to thoughtful, and it affected her. 'Thanks, Charlie,' she said softly. 'I'll have to get my CD player back.'

'From where?'

'My dad's guest house. I finally left home.'

'Good move.'

'Not so good. I moved in with a friend who decided I was a slob and threw me out.'

He raised his bushy eyebrows. 'A slob, huh?'

'Yeah.' She smiled and gestured around his untidy bedroom. 'Kind of like you.'

'You need a place to stay?'

She hesitated, 'Well . . .'

'I got guest rooms comin' out my ass. You can move in here.'

'I do plan on getting my own apartment,' she said quickly, 'but first I guess I have to find a job – so if I *can* stay here for a few days . . .'

'A few days, a few months, who gives a shit as long as you don't bug me.'

'I promise I'll leave you completely alone.'

Grabbing her, he pulled her in for a big wet kiss.

'Let's not get carried away, kiddo. I had an interesting time the other night, didn't you?'

'It was . . . memorable.'

'So why didja sneak off before I woke up? Maybe I needed glowing reviews.'

'I didn't want to disturb you.'

'Hey - ' He pressed her hand between his legs. 'You can feel how you disturb me, and it's a good thing, a *real* good thing.'

'I'm not a blonde, Charlie.'

He frowned. 'What did you say?'

'Nothing,' she said, sinking to her knees.

She knew exactly what he required, and she didn't mind obliging.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



For over a week Michael drifted in and out of consciousness lying in a hospital bed. When he finally opened his eyes for a sustained period of time he had absolutely no idea where he was.

He lay there, trying to collect his thoughts, realizing he was connected to tubes, that his head ached like a sonofabitch and that he was unbelievably thirsty. And then it suddenly came to him. He'd been shot. He'd been fucking shot!

Struggling to remember, it all became clear. A drug bust. Two guys. One of them retreating. He'd known something was wrong, spun around searching for danger and nearly got blown away.

He groaned. His head felt like it would bust wide open and he'd kill for a glass of water. 'Anybody around?' he croaked.

A nurse appeared at his bedside, an earnest little thing with cropped brown hair and sparkling eyes. 'Mr Scorsini,' she said, 'I do believe you're with us again.'

'Got shot,' he mumbled.

'No, you didn't,' she replied gently, patting his arm reassuringly.

'Yeah, yeah, I got shot,' he insisted.

'No, Mr Scorsini,' she said, placing a cool hand on his forehead.

'Gotta have water,' he managed.

'Only if you promise to drink it slowly.'

She fetched a paper cup half full of water and held it to his lips.

He sipped it slowly, savouring every welcome drop.

'I have to go call Mr Robbins now,' she said, withdrawing the cup. 'I've alerted the doctor. He's on his way to see you.'

'Quincy's here in New York?'

'You're in LA, Mr Scorsini.'

Yeah, sure, what did *she* know?

His head felt like a launching pad for rocket ships. Gingerly he reached up, touching his shoulder, knowing that's where he'd been shot.

There were no bandages – nothing. Goddamn it, they weren't looking after him properly. Had to get the hell out of *this* hospital.

After a few minutes the nurse returned to his bedside. 'Mr Robbins is on his way,' she said. 'He's very happy to hear you're awake.'

'Where's my bandages?'

'What bandages?'

'I told you – I got shot.'

'No, Mr Scorsini, you were in a car accident.'

He attempted to sit up, but couldn't quite make it. Falling back he mumbled, 'I know who did it. Bin workin' this case for months. Where's the Captain? I gotta talk to him.'

'Please relax, Mr Scorsini.'

Squeezing his eyes shut he tried to remember more. Yeah, he and his partner had been working undercover when the shit went down. They'd met in a warehouse on 42nd Street and everything should have gone real smooth. But no, there was this one Puerto Rican guy who'd gotten suspicious and ducked out of sight. Sensing danger, he'd called to his partner to cover him while he went after the asshole.

And then the gunshot – so fucking loud, busting into his body, breaking it apart. And after that – unbelievable pain.

He remembered hitting the ground. The ambulance ride to the hospital. Frantic faces leaning over him.

Then he recalled waking up and somebody telling him they'd removed the bullet.

Fuck the scrambled eggs. By the time Quincy arrived he was ready to move, his strength coming back by the minute. 'What happened? How'd I get here?' he demanded impatiently.

'You're asking *me*?' Quincy said, waving his arms around. 'I was expecting *you* to explain it. Your car flipped over the side of Mulholland, and you got thrown out. They found you halfway down the hill. You're goddamn lucky to be alive.'

'I wasn't anywhere near Mulholland. I followed Daly Forrest to a house in Hancock Park. He went inside, and I made my way around the back. That's when I heard Bella's voice. I was about to go for her when I must've gotten hit on the head.'

Quincy looked sceptical. 'You sure?'

'Course I'm sure.'

'Then how do you explain the car wreck?'

'They wanted me out the way. It was a set-up.'

Quincy scratched his chin. 'Who's they? An' why would they go to all this trouble?'

He was already halfway out of bed. 'That's what we're gonna find out when you get me outta here.'

'They won't release you, I already checked.'

'Get me my clothes. And my gun.'

'You'll have to make a police statement.'

'What'll I say? That I was driving up Mulholland and zipped over the edge by mistake?'

'Yeah, that's it, 'cause if you go with the other story nobody's gonna believe you.'

'Find my clothes, Q. I told you, we're outta here.'

Quincy knew better than to argue.



Getting past the downstairs porter in Daly Forrest's apartment building on Wilshire was no problem, by this time they were old friends.

Quincy trailed behind Michael . . .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Mason Rich flew out from New York to be with Kennedy at her father's funeral. It was a small affair as most of her parents' friends had long passed away.

Nurse Linford sobbed openly when the casket was lowered into the ground. 'My father was very fond of you,' Kennedy said, trying to comfort her. 'He told me often.'

'I loved that man,' Nurse Linford replied, tears rolling down her cheeks.

'I know,' Kennedy said sadly. 'We'll all miss him.'

After the funeral, Mason insisted she accompany him to his hotel for a late lunch.

'I can't eat,' she said listlessly, as the waiter led them to a table.

'You can and you will,' he said firmly. 'But first you need a strong drink.'

She picked at a salad while he spoke about New York and mutual friends — all kinds of inconsequential stuff. 'You have to realize,' he said at last, 'that if your father was in pain he's better off where he is now.'

She sipped the vodka he'd made her order and stared at him. Mason had pointed features and a slick of smooth brown hair that some people thought was a rug. He dressed as if he was about to pose for a fashion spread in *G.Q.* There was no way she could ever find him attractive, but she was well aware he lusted after her, even though he was very much married. 'That's a cliché, Mason,' she said flatly.

'What else do you expect me to say at a time like this?'

'I don't know.' She paused for a moment before continuing. 'It's just that when your second parent dies it makes you painfully aware of your own mortality. It's quite frightening. I feel very alone.'

Mason signalled the waiter for another drink. 'Your father was old, and you have to remember he lived an interesting life. In many cultures if a person has lived a long and rewarding life, death becomes a celebration.'

'I know, it's just that I feel as if I'm next in line. It makes me vulnerable.'

'You're thirty-five years old, you're not going anywhere,' Mason said with a dry laugh.

'I guess not.' She gazed out the window, then glanced back at him. 'Thanks for coming out here.'

He pressed his hand over hers. 'That's what friends are for.'

Managing a wan smile, she said, 'Isn't that a song title?'

'At least I can make you smile,' he said, as the waiter brought him his drink – a second martini. 'Now here's my suggestion,' he said. 'Take a few weeks off, fly to Hawaii, lie in the sun and forget about everything.'

'You know that's not my style.'

'You have to mourn, K.C., it's a good thing.'

Shaking her head she said, 'No, what I have to do is keep working. In fact, I'd like to talk to you about my first story.'

'Didn't you mention the other day you were going to write about women in Hollywood?'

'I've changed my mind. I was thinking of writing about an ordinary woman who gets murdered outside her own home.'

'Somebody I've heard of?'

'No, and I'm not even sure if I'll write it, I have to investigate further. It's still violence against women, but why must we always focus on the high-profile side of it?'

'If celebrities aren't involved who's going to want to read it?'

'You'd be surprised.'

Drumming his fingers on the table he said, 'Since we're talking about work, can we discuss your Bobby Rush piece?'

'What is there to discuss?'

'It's lightweight. You make him out to be too nice.'

'He is nice.'

'Maybe. But I need more juice. I thought you were planning on covering the father/son angle - stirring it up.'

'I thought you gave assurances we wouldn't touch that angle.'

Mason didn't care. 'Do a rewrite,' he said. 'Expose nepotism in Hollywood, the shallowness of fame, and let's hear who he's screwing.'

Kennedy controlled her anger. 'Get yourself another hack.'

'I'm not criticizing your writing,' Mason said quickly. 'It's a well-written piece, and I like the mistaken identity angle.'

'What *are* you saying?' she challenged. 'That you don't want to run it?'

'Juice it up, K.C.'

'I wrote Bobby Rush the way I saw him.'

'OK, OK, but don't soft-pedal your next celebrity assignment. I'm pretty certain we can get you Charlie Dollar.'

Her interest perked. 'Yes?'

'He's executive producer on his new movie so he's hot to promote. He doesn't usually do print, but a cover story on *Style Wars* will suit him fine.' He snapped his fingers for the cheque, 'I have a plane to catch. You sure you're all right?'

'I'm certain, Mason. And once again, I really appreciate you flying out here, it means a lot to me.'

'Any time, K.C., you know you're my favourite,' he said, planting a wet kiss on her cheek.

Rosa, who'd had to run back to the TV studio after the funeral, appeared at her apartment in the early evening. 'I'm spending the night,' she announced, dumping a huge Fendi travel bag in the hall.

'No, you're not,' Kennedy said firmly.

'Yes, I am,' Rosa replied, equally firm. 'We'll talk, we'll eat, we'll have a girls' night in.'

made six urgent phone calls before dashing from the apartment. 'I'll call you later,' she said, waving as she hurried to her car. 'Catch me on the six o'clock news, and take a look at the latest weather guy, I hear he's available.'

What a matchmaker! The last thing Kennedy needed was a man. She needed space and time. She needed to throw herself into her work.

With that in mind she went to the library and read everything she could about the woman's murder in Agoura Hills. Her father was right – why focus on high-profile Hollywood when there were stories taking place every day that affected people in a far more immediate way.

A woman had died violently and she couldn't find much coverage – only two newspaper reports. The first featured a dramatic headline:

WOMAN SLAIN OUTSIDE OWN HOME

She scanned the story:

Margarita Lynda, 37, was found strangled to death next to her car outside her house early this morning. There was no apparent robbery attempt, and rape is not suspected. A passerby spotted the body at 7.40 a.m. and summoned deputies. Lynda, an Agoura Hills resident, was separated from her husband and had no children. She was a film make-up artist who had recently completed work on a Grant Lennon movie. Sheriff's officials are investigating.

The second story was even briefer.

Hmm . . . Kennedy thought, not much to go on. But her journalistic mind was in action. Why had this woman been murdered? What was the movie?

It was her destiny to find out. She owed it to the memory of her father.

The Man trailed his soon-to-be victim all day long. It gave him a perverse thrill knowing that he could follow her every move without her realizing.

He knew his victim. He knew plenty about her.

Fact one. She was a lesbian.

Fact two. She lived with her mother.

Fact three. She had two cats and a small dog.

His victim spent a busy day. First there was a trip to the dry cleaners, the photographic shop, a stop at the shoe repairers, lunch with a friend, and then a movie. It was not a film The Man was interested in, it was a foolish love story. But he sat in the theatre anyway - two seats behind his victim, who was not alone. She was with her friend from lunch, a younger woman in a yellow sweater and loose slacks.

Perverts, The Man thought to himself. He'd never understood how one woman could be attracted to another. It simply wasn't right.

After the movie the two companions shared a coffee and then went their separate ways.

The Man followed his victim home. He thought about taking her then and there before she entered her house, but it was so light out, and he didn't want to run any risks. He had no intention of getting caught. There was no way he could ever get back to jail again.

He waited in his car, parked in a spot where nobody would

notice. He waited patiently knowing that at nine o'clock his victim would emerge and walk her dog as she did every night.

Sure enough this event occurred.

The Man left his car and fell into step behind her as she walked along the quiet side-street in West Hollywood. After a few moments the victim sensed she was being followed and glanced behind her.

The Man did not hesitate, he approached boldly. 'Do you have the time?' he asked politely.

She looked at him, a puzzled expression crossing her face. 'Don't I know—?'

The Man nodded. 'Yes, you know me,' he said, not allowing her to finish her sentence.

With one massive blow he knocked her to the ground, taking her by surprise. She fell silently. Her small dog began to bark and growl. He gave it a vicious kick and it scampered off down the street whimpering.

The Man squatted next to his victim, placing his hands around her throat and slowly and methodically began to squeeze.

She struggled once, her body twitching uncontrollably, and then it was over.

There was one thing left to do. The Man reached into his inner pocket producing a thin strip of cardboard on which he had pasted — with letters cut from newspapers — the words DEATH TO THE TRAITORS. He placed it neatly across her chest, took one last look around and returned to his car.

Then he drove off, humming softly to himself.

Victim number two disposed of. Four more to go.

He was a master of the game.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Living with Charlie Dollar was quite a trip. He was totally undemanding, not at all possessive, and didn't care how much of a mess she made. The only drag was his stern housekeeper, who eyed her like she was about to commit treason on a daily basis.

'Ignore the old witch,' Charlie said with one of his crazed huckles. 'She's been with me fifteen years. Princess Di could move in and she wouldn't approve.'

'But she watches me, Charlie, like I'm about to *steal* something.'

'Are you?'

Jordanna stuck out her tongue and wiggled it at him. 'Fuck you, asshole.'

'Anybody ever told you you got a mouth like a truck driver?'

She grinned. 'Yeah, frequently.'

'So clean up your dialogue, kiddo,' he said good-naturedly. 'It ain't ladylike.'

One thing about their relationship — they were compatible, even if he *was* nearly thirty years older than her. Jordanna genuinely enjoyed his company, he was certainly more fun to be with than some Midnight Cowboy with a tight ass and empty brain, and God knew she'd had enough of them to last two lifetimes. She didn't know much about his past love life and she really didn't care. The word was that he'd been living with an actress up until a few months ago, and they had a

three-year-old child together that he saw occasionally. Questioning wasn't her style. If Charlie wanted to tell her anything he would. As it was she felt they were a couple, and it was a nice secure feeling.

Some of his habits drove her crazy. He played Sinatra and Tony Bennett on the stereo — full volume yet! He ate cornflakes in bed in the middle of the night. He was always stoned. And he liked her to give him endless head.

After several days she decided to go to her father's guest house and collect a few more of her possessions. Even though she slept most nights with Charlie in his bedroom, she'd staked out a nice big corner room in the house and there was plenty of space for her things.

'You gonna tell your old man you moved in with me?' Charlie asked, a wicked glint in his eyes.

'Why would I do that?' she replied coolly, unwilling to get into a discussion about her father.

'Surely he's curious to know where you're living?'

Shrugging, she said, 'Jordan has a new wife to worry about, he doesn't care what I do.'

Charlie nodded wisely. 'He will — when he gets a sniff you're living with me.'

Was it her imagination or did he seem to want Jordan to now?

'You have your opinion, and I have mine,' she said, thinking that she had no intention of telling her father. If she is lucky she could sneak back to the guest house, grab her stuff, and be out of there before anyone even realized she was around.

Unfortunately it was not to be. When she arrived at the guest house she was confronted by Kim, standing at the door supervising a couple of maids and two removal men.

She watched in amazement as her favourite couch was rolled out. 'What the hell's going on?' she asked, out-

ed.

Kim hardly glanced in her direction. 'Oh, it's you.'

'Yeah, it's me, and what the hell'

'I was under the impression you left,' Kim said briskly. 'That's what Jordan told me.'

'Whether I left or not you have no business messing with my things.'

'I'm having everything put in storage,' Kim said offhandedly. 'We need the space.'

'You've got enough space to accommodate a fucking football team!' Jordanna said furiously.

'We need more,' Kim replied, with a tight little smile.

'Why?'

Kim gave a long-drawn-out sigh. 'I suppose you'll hear soon so I may as well tell you - your father and I are having aby.'

The hooker was pregnant? *No fucking way.*

Jordanna caught her breath, desperately trying to stay in control. 'Does Jordan know?' she blurted foolishly.

Kim threw her a withering look as she fiddled with her blonde curls. 'Of course he does.'

'I wasn't talking about the pregnancy,' Jordanna retorted sharply, determined to gain the upper hand.

What *were* you talking about?'

She played her ace card. 'Remember Donna?'

Donna who?' Kim said, her pretty face mask-like.

Donna for the kill. 'Donna Lacey.'

Kim didn't take a beat. 'I met her once or twice. Why?'

Because she sure remembers you.' Jordanna paused briefly.

She was continuing. 'Tell me, Kim, is Jordan aware of your past?'

There was a flicker. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Kim pressed on. 'I think you do.'

Kim's tone turned low and angry. 'Why don't you leave me alone? Isn't it enough you're still taking money from him and his age?'

'That's none of your business,' Jordanna said angrily.

'It's making it my business.'

They glared at each other.

'Our father's had a very difficult life,' Kim said at last. 'He doesn't need to listen to your lies about me.'

'A difficult life indeed!' Jordanna snorted. 'Like *you* would know.'

'I know everything about Jordan – including how disappointed he is in you.'

Kim's words stung. Was he really disappointed in her, or was Kim simply making it up to hurt her?

'The only thing you know is that you love every moment of being Mrs Jordan Levitt,' she fired back. 'You sure move in on him big time, didn't you?'

'Yes, I did,' Kim replied defiantly. 'And you're not spoiling it for me.'

'I can try.'

'Where's your proof? He'll never believe you.'

'I'll *get* proof.'

'I'm having his baby,' Kim said triumphantly. 'You don't have a chance.'

'We'll see.'

'Do what you have to do,' Kim said with an exasperated sigh. 'Because, frankly, if it's a choice between you and me, *know* who he'll choose.' She turned around and marched down the path towards the big house.

'Don't bet on it!' Jordanna yelled after her.

Kim didn't look back.

Jordanna rushed into the guest house. Two Spanish maids were busy loading up boxes with her possessions. 'What are you doing?' she asked, grabbing a stack of tapes out of one of the women's hands.

'Mrs Levitt – she told us to pack everything,' the shorter woman said, her broad face expressionless.

'Please get out of here,' Jordanna said wearily, 'I'll take care of it myself.'

The women exchanged glances and left.

So Daddy really wanted her out permanently. Well, that was fine with her, she certainly wasn't staying where she wasn't welcome, and there was no way she'd accept any money from him either.

number of a moving firm. They promised to have a van there within the hour.

By five o'clock she was packed and ready to split. There was no word from Jordan. Surprise, surprise. Should she go say goodbye, and casually throw into the conversation she was living with Charlie Dollar?

Why not? May as well piss him off all the way.

She headed for the main house and was disappointed to find nobody around except Kim, who emerged from the kitchen and said a curt, 'Yes?'

'Where's my father?'

'Oh, didn't I mention he's away on a location scout,' Kim said sweetly. 'So . . . I guess your little talk with him will have to wait.'

'It *can* wait, Kim. When you see him, tell him he can call me at Charlie Dollar's.'

Kim raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

'Yes, *really*.'

Licking her pink lips Kim gave a small venomous smile. 'Do give *Charlie* my love,' she said. 'We're *old* friends.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Driving back to Charlie's with the moving van following closely behind her Porsche, Jordanna couldn't help wondering about Kim's expression of triumph. *Give him my love. Ha!* Was Kim one of the blondes that Cheryl had mentioned Charlie enjoyed getting it on with?

Easy enough to find out. She called Cheryl on the car phone.

'Where have you been?' Cheryl asked. 'I haven't heard from you in days.'

'I'll tell you later. Right now I'm after information.'

'What information?'

'Remember you told me that Charlie Dollar was into like kind of a watching thing with blondes?'

'I *knew* you were jealous,' Cheryl shrieked.

'Merely curious. Was Kim one of the blondes?'

'I'll call back.'
'You're being so mysterious.'
'All will be revealed later.'



Charlie's housekeeper took one quick look at the van loaded with Jordanna's possessions and scurried off to find her boss.

Jordanna issued instructions to the moving men as they unloaded the truck.

After a few minutes Charlie wandered out to the front of the house, tucking his shirt into his pants. He stood on the top step surveying the action. 'I see you're moving in,' he said at last.

'You told me I could stay.'

'I didn't know you were bringing a van full of stuff.'

She hoped he wasn't going to be difficult. 'Is it a problem, Charlie?'

'Nope. As a matter of fact I'm kind of pleased.'

'You are?'

'I said to make yourself at home.'

'Thank you.'

'The thing is, kiddo, we'll have fun while it lasts, but eventually you'll have to find your own place. And like you said — get yourself a job. 'Cause the truth of the matter is, ain't Daddy, and you gotta make your own spending money.'

She narrowed her eyes, annoyed that he thought she was after his precious money. 'Did I ask you for money, Charlie?'

'No, but I'm sure you're gonna want some, so I came up with a Charlie Dollar special-on-sale brilliant idea.'

'What idea is that?'

'I scored you a job, kiddo.'

'A job?'

'Yeah. I had lunch with Bobby Rush, an' whaddya know he's looking for an assistant. I told him you'd fit right in.'

'Thanks a lot,' she said, not exactly thrilled at the prospect of working for Bobby Rush.

'Anything wrong with that?'

'I did that assistant thing once, it's boring.'

'Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't it *you* who told me you wanted to act?'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'It doesn't just fall into place, kiddo, you have to learn. It'll be good for you to be on a set watching what goes on.'

'I've been on a set since I was born,' she said, exasperated that he was trying to fix her up without asking her.

'So you'll do it again. I started off shifting scenery – got me an education before I went in front of the camera. It sure put *me* ahead of the game.'

'Charlie –'

Now he was challenging her, his eyes watchful and amused. 'Too tough a gig, huh?' he asked, staring her down.

'I *can* do it,' she said defensively. 'I just don't want to.'

'You'll make your own money for once.'

Finally it was getting interesting. 'How much?'

Charlie chuckled. 'I'll negotiate for you, kiddo. I'm a specialist when it comes to killer deals.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Cheryl searched through the books. Donna had used a code for important men which she'd explained before leaving town. Movie stars were listed under special names. Cheryl checked for Charlie Dollar and found he was known as Big Money. She then looked over Big Money's preferences. It appeared he didn't indulge often, but when he did he had very particular requirements. Two big-breasted blondes with long hair and no inhibitions.

Rapidly scanning the names of girls he'd had, Cheryl ascertained that Kim was indeed one of them.

She immediately called Shep. 'Where's Jordy?'

'How would I know?'

'Wasn't she staying with you?'

'Left a few days ago.'

'Why?'

'Said she was moving in with Charlie Dollar. I haven't heard from her since.'

'Charlie Dollar? Are you sure?'

'That's what she told me.'

'Hmm . . . giving it away for free again,' Cheryl said disapprovingly. 'I could make her a fortune.'

'You're disgusting.'

'Why's that, Shep, dear?'

'Don't you realize what you're doing?'

'Fulfilling a need. One that *you* obviously don't have.'

'Excuse me?'

'Oh, come off it, everyone knows your preference.'

A long silent moment, then, '*Bitch!*'

'Likewise.'

She was about to call Arnie to find out Charlie's number when a girl arrived for a pre-arranged interview. What a business! Pick the best prospects, send them out on a job and pocket forty per cent of the fee. There was no shortage of girls, they applied in droves, recommended by friends and acquaintances. And because this was Hollywood they were usually pretty, with good bodies - all of them, with few exceptions, would-be actresses, singers and models, out to pick up extra money.

The girl today was a voluptuous nineteen-year-old brunette with a Cindy Crawford look. She was perfectly lovely except for her crooked front teeth which needed fixing big time. Cheryl loved being in a position of power. Criticizing the girls was a definite highlight of the job, plus making big bucks and enjoying the special relationship she was beginning to develop with the johns.

Ah . . . the johns - what a mixed-up group *they* were. Donna had warned her about their idiosyncrasies, but, jeez, some of these guys were into *major* weird.

One client requested girls dressed as nuns; another required every hair on their bodies to be shaved; another Arab prince ordered . . .

endless cans of Beluga caviar so he could eat and drink off the girl of his choice. Cheryl's personal favourite was the big action star who got off on being scolded while three girls dressed in green leather elf uniforms led him around the room on a choke-chain leash.

Cheryl felt true power for the first time in her life. In fact, she felt so in control that she'd stopped her twice-weekly visits to her shrink. Being a madam was better than therapy any day. She finally felt fulfilled.

She often thought about what would happen if her illustrious and socially connected parents ever found out what she was doing now.

They would hang themselves in the middle of Chasens, that's what would happen. Her mother — so proper and Nancy Reagan-like when she wasn't rolling around drunk. And her father, Ethan, Mister Big Studio Owner, with two mistresses he'd had for ten years stashed in matching apartments either end of town. What a hypocrite *he* was, she was surprised she hadn't found him listed in Donna's fat black book.

Fortunately she didn't have to seek their approval any more, she'd made it on her own.

Idly she wondered if Shep was right, and Jordanna *had* moved in with Charlie Dollar. Shacking up with a dissolute movie star old enough to be her father was pure Jordanna.

'How much can I expect to make a week?'

Cheryl was jolted back to reality by the lovely girl sitting in front of her with the crooked front teeth.

'Uh . . . it all depends,' she said. 'If the client likes you — return engagements can be quite frequent.'

'I'm only doing this because I need the money,' the girl said. 'And my friend told me I'll meet men who might help my career.'

Cheryl nodded. How naïve these girls were. Did they honestly believe anyone was going to help them? The truth was they'd get royally fucked for a year or two, make a lot of money, and hopefully go home to the little town they came from and marry the boy next door.

'We'll have to get your teeth fixed,' Cheryl said bluntly.

The girl's hand flew to cover her mouth. 'I can't afford it,' she muttered guiltily.

'I'll give you an advance, it'll be deducted from your fees.'

Another fifteen minutes of conversation and Cheryl sent the girl on her way with a dentist's appointment and a rendezvous with Grant that evening.

Grant was her front man, sleeping with the girls on a trial basis and later giving her a full report so she was sure they knew what they were doing. He performed this service for free. Hardly a favour, since sex was the main thrust of his life as he strove to keep up with his father's legendary reputation. On one level it saddened Cheryl that Grant was prepared to do this. But at least it kept them close, and she'd always liked having him around.

The phone rang. It was head of development at one of the major studios. They exchanged pleasantries for a few moments before he announced the real reason for his call. 'We got a French actor in town, totally crazed. He requires two girls – one Eurasian, one good old American white trash – he's into that Guess-girl look, the one with the big silicone tits and the straw in her hair. His hotel, eight o'clock tonight.' A slight pause. 'Oh, and, honey, have your girls bring the coke. My connection's taking a trip.'

'No problem,' Cheryl replied calmly, although this was the first time she'd been asked to supply drugs, and it didn't give her much of an opportunity to decide whether she wanted to do so or not.

After putting the phone down she called Grant and asked if he could help out. Grant didn't have to think about it, he offered to supply her with whatever she needed. 'My friendly neighbourhood dealer will be happy to oblige,' he said. 'Don't worry about it.'

Things were moving faster than she'd expected.

Too fast, maybe?

No. Never.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Weeks passed and nothing became clear except that he'd been set up. Michael couldn't find a lead of any kind and it was driving him insane. He had a daughter out there somewhere and nobody knew what had happened to her. It was almost like Bella had never existed.

Rita was dead. Murdered. So was Daly Forrest. The lovers shot execution-style, and the kicker was — with his gun. The gun Quincy couldn't find when they'd checked out of the hospital had turned up in Daly's apartment, and Michael immediately became suspect number one. Now he was sure he'd been set up. They'd knocked him out, taken his gun, and used it for the double killing. And he had no idea who 'they' were. The cops had experienced no trouble tracking the gun to him, he'd purchased it as soon as he'd arrived in California, acquired a legal permit to carry — and now this.

The detective on the case had hauled him in for questioning and he wasn't released until it was established he'd been with Quincy since leaving the hospital and therefore couldn't have done it.

Within hours the media jumped on the case. It was a hot one. A good-looking redhead and a rich older man, discovered in bed together in a luxurious apartment. He'd produced porno movies. She'd starred in one. And her ex-husband had discovered the bodies. Juicy stuff. The TV news magazines went to town.

The detective handling the case let out the information about the missing child and the father searching for her. Suddenly Michael was big news, and found himself pursued by the press. To Amber's fury they gathered outside the Robbins' house waiting to pounce.

After forty-eight hours of this inconvenience, Michael moved out and went into hiding in a hotel. The press tracked him down. He moved to another hotel, and hours later they were staking a spot outside still begging for an interview.

'Maybe you *should* do something,' Quincy suggested. 'Somebody out there watching might know where Bella is. Whyn't you talk to Rosa Alvarez on the local news? A friend of mine knows her boyfriend, so let's see if we can set it up an' make sure she treats you right.'

Michael nodded. He was getting desperate. 'Go ahead, arrange it.'

After all, he had nothing to lose.

The events of the last few weeks were a horrible blur. After dealing with the police and finally convincing them he'd had nothing to do with the killings, he'd set off on a quest of his own to get to the truth. Nobody seemed to remember Bella, although they all remembered Rita – she'd cut quite a swath.

The first thing he'd done was return to the house in Hancock Park where he'd followed Daly Forrest. The door was answered by an ancient caretaker who'd informed him the house was unoccupied and had been for several years. Michael didn't believe him, but what could he do?

He'd checked out the back garden, peering through the kitchen window. From what he could see, the room looked dusty and unused – maybe the old man *was* telling the truth, and he'd gotten the wrong house. Since being hit on the head he'd been suffering from the occasional blinding headache – Christ, what if he was losing his fucking memory?

His next move had been to go after Heron Jones, only to discover Heron had taken off, leaving no forwarding address. Quincy and Amber had

'We're gonna find your kid,' Quincy assured him daily. 'If she's out there we'll find her.'

In the meantime he continued to pursue every lead, getting exactly nowhere. He talked to business acquaintances and employees of Daly's, he even tracked a scattering of the movie crew who'd worked with Rita on the one movie she'd performed in. And performed was the right word. He'd seen it - a soft porn exploitive piece of crap, with Rita in a small role making all the appropriate moves.

It saddened him that she'd thought appearing in that kind of low-life film was going to get her anywhere.

The police put out a Missing Persons Report on Bella, informing him that's all they could do.

Meanwhile, the investigation of Daly and Rita's murder reached a dead end. There were suspects involved with the porn industry, but nobody they could pin anything on. It was frustrating, but Michael refused to give up.

Rosa Alvarez arrived at his hotel with her crew. She was warm and sympathetic. 'I'm so sorry, Michael, to hear about your little girl,' she said, pressing her hand over his.

'Look,' he informed her. 'I'm uncomfortable doing this, but I need to put out a message in case anybody knows anything. You'll show Bella's picture on camera, right?'

'Just tell me your story,' Rosa said soothingly. 'And I'm sure we'll see results.'

He shrugged. 'It's a short story.'

'Somebody must know something,' Rosa said, taking a quick peek in a hand mirror and fluffing her hair. 'And if they do, this interview could persuade them to come forward.'

'Yeah,' he said, still not fully convinced he was doing the right thing.

'Now, Michael, try to relax,' Rosa said, sitting down in a chair. 'Just pretend it's you and me talking.'

'You make it sound so easy.'

'It will be if we take it nice and slow.'

The sound man began attaching a small microphone to the lapel of his sports jacket. The thought of this interview frightened the shit out of him. Michael Scorsini, who'd faced

up to guns, drug dealers and God knew what else, was scared, and yet at the same time hopeful.

When the interview started he was dry-mouthed and found himself mumbling all over the place. But Rosa knew her stuff, she dealt with him gently, drawing him out until he told his story as clearly as he could.

When it was over she seemed pleased. She handed him her card. 'Call me, we're sure to get a big response.'

He pocketed her card. 'Thanks. I appreciate this.'

'I'd like to do a follow-up - maybe in a couple of weeks? Perhaps we'll have good news. What do you think?'

'What do I think? I think I'm gonna find my daughter and then we'll see.'



'I've caught you a live one,' Rosa announced triumphantly as she and Kennedy worked out.

Kennedy was on the treadmill, reaching the end of a vigorous thirty-minute stint. 'How many times do I have to tell you,' she said, almost out of breath, 'Nix was positively my last blind date.'

'No, no,' Rosa said, lifting light hand-weights. 'You don't understand.'

'Oh, yes, I understand perfectly.'

'This guy is the one,' Rosa said, working on her arms. 'And handsome too. He looks like a movie star. If I wasn't with Ferdy I'd grab him for myself. But since I'm such a generous friend I'm handing him your way.'

Kennedy slowed the treadmill down. 'Thanks, but no thanks.'

'Let me tell you about him,' Rosa said, full of enthusiasm. 'He's an ex-New York detective. In fact, he's *the* ex-detective, the one who's been all over the news. You know, with the missing kid.'

'Great! Now you're bringing me a guy with problems on top of everything else.'

'No, no, this problem will get solved. O.K.'

what the outcome will be, it doesn't sound good, but who knows?' She paused for a moment before adding, 'There's something about Michael – I know you'll love him.'

Kennedy stepped off the treadmill, grabbed a towel and slung it around her neck. 'I will *not* love him, because I am *not* going to meet him.'

Rosa put down the weights and took a breather. 'Did you see my interview with him? The response was amazing, *we* got over *three hundred* letters from women. Can you believe it? And, what's more, forty-three of them proposed marriage!'

'That's good. He can find himself a lovely wife, go off and live happily ever.'

'What's the matter with you lately? Don't you have any heart? I'm offering you this great-looking guy that forty-three women want to marry, and you're turning him down?'

'Rosa, English is your first language, right?'

'Yes.'

'Then why don't you understand me? I do *not* wish to be fixed up.'

'You used to be willing to take chances.'

'I still do – in my work.'

'So now you're becoming a nun?'

Kennedy ignored the comment. 'By the way,' she said, 'I've been meaning to ask, do you know anything about the woman who was murdered in West Hollywood a few weeks ago?'

'What woman?'

'Her name was Stephanie Wolff – she was strangled, the same MO as Margarita Lynda.'

'Really?'

'Two women, both strangled for no apparent reason, neither of them raped or robbed.'

'Hmm . . . I'll get the news division to look into it.'

'I wish you would. I've tried calling the police to see if the murders are connected in any way, but I got nowhere.'

Rosa stretched and picked up the weights again. 'What are you writing about these women for anyway? They're not famous.'

Kennedy laughed drily. 'You sound like my editor. I somebody gets murdered do they have to be famous before anybody pays attention?'

'I thought celebrity interviews were your thing. When does your Bobby Rush piece appear?'

'It'll be on the stands this week.'

'Did you hear from him after your interview?'

'No. He tried calling me a couple of times. I never returned the calls.'

'Why?'

'Because I didn't want to explain myself. Better he reads the interview, I think he'll like it.'

'I'm sure he will,' Rosa said, with a sigh. 'And if he does, and he calls again, will you date him?'

'No.'

'No, huh?' Rosa shook her head. 'You're a strange one.'



Amber deposited her children with a girlfriend and spent two days traipsing around until she found Michael an apartment - a perfectly nice furnished one-bedroom on Riverside Drive in the Valley.

'Don't know what I'd do without you,' he told her gratefully as she helped him settle in.

'Somehow I've got a feeling you'd manage,' Amber said, organizing the tiny kitchen. 'You're a survivor. You keep on proving it.'

He caught her in a hug. 'That's 'cause I've got good friends who are always around to support me.'

She looked at him for a moment, her eyes full of sympathy. 'We care about you, Michael. Underneath that tough guy exterior lurks a very special friend.'

Her words touched him, but it wasn't enough to jolt him out of a deep depression.

After she left, he sat in his new apartment on his rented couch and thought about having a drink. A double Scotch. With ice.

Oh, Christ, he could fucking smell it, taste it, feel the strong liquid burning a path down his throat.

Why not? he asked himself. *Why the fuck not?* Because he had to stay sober to find his daughter. There was no chance if he was out of his head. And that's how alcohol affected him. It turned him into a crazy man. It turned him into his fucking stepfather. Uncontrollable.

I am powerless over alcohol, he thought. Totally powerless.

He'd never forget the night before the day he'd sobered up. What a bad trip that was. Rita and he got involved in one of their usual fights about money and her extravagant spending habits. She'd screamed at him that he was no good – exactly like his real father.

'You don't know my real father,' he'd yelled at her.

'I don't *have* to,' she'd yelled back. 'Sal told me all about him, and you're just as bad. A loser. A nothing. A down-and-out bum!'

He'd stormed out of their apartment and gone to a bar where, after two hours of heavy drinking, he'd allowed himself to get picked up by a tall sexy blonde in a mini-skirt and tight sweater.

Drinking was his curse, when he drank he became a different person – someone he hated – but once he started he couldn't stop.

The blonde was persistent and he wasn't resisting. They'd ended up in a cheap hotel room off Times Square with a bottle of straight tequila and their hands all over each other. She'd given him head and he'd grabbed her tits.

Memories were blurred up until then, but he'd never forget what happened next. Everything had flashed into sharp focus when the sexy blonde had dropped her short skirt and lace panties and shown him her penis and balls.

Goddamn it! He'd realized he was with a fucking transvestite!

He'd beaten the crap out of 'it', and her/his screaming could be heard for blocks. He'd pulled his gun and wanted to blow the pervert's brains out. Fortunately the cops had

he would have. Oh yeah, no doubt about it.

The next day Quincy had gotten him into Rehab for a gruelling four weeks. After that he'd started attending AA meetings.

He'd never looked back. His past was too scary.

He realized now that he needed to work the programme again, start attending meetings before it was too late.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot
change. The courage to change
the things I can. And the
wisdom to know the difference.

He remembered the AA Serenity Prayer and immediately felt calmer.

The truth was he was in a slump because he honestly didn't know what to do next. He was a detective for chrissakes, he knew how to solve cases – but he couldn't get anywhere with finding his own daughter and it was breaking him up.

He'd loved Rita once, she was the mother of his child, but there was no way he could summon up any grief about her demise, only anger that she'd deprived him of his little girl.

Quincy was working on a case involving a series of threatening letters being sent to the daughter of a television magnate. At first he'd assisted Michael in his investigation of Rita's murder and Bella's disappearance as best he could, but work beckoned, and when they'd encountered a series of leads that took them nowhere, he'd finally had to back off.

In the morning Quincy called and insisted he come for dinner that night. On the way over he stopped off at a meeting. It was a worthwhile move and calmed him considerably.

Amber had cooked meatloaf, mashed potatoes and crisp fried onions. Comfort food. They sat around the kitchen table enjoying each other's company.

Amber decided he needed the company of a woman. Quincy decided he needed to get laid. They were both on his

ase, until he finally acquiesced and agreed to go out on a date with a friend of Amber's from her salsa dance class. 'I don't know her well,' Amber explained. 'But she sure is pretty. I showed her your picture and she's willing to meet you.'

'The bad news is she's a would-be actress,' Quincy interrupted, grinning. 'I got a look at her the other night when I met Amber from class. Nice legs - get her in the sack and wrap 'em around your neck, Mike, you'll be a new man!' Amber tut-tutted. 'Is that the only thing you can think of - sex? It's companionship he needs at a time like this.' Quincy's grin broadened. 'Yeah, sure, honey, companion ship, an' a little pussy to go with it!' 'You're so crude,' Amber said crossly. 'It's part of my charm, sweet thing!' Quincy said, throwing Michael a knowing wink.



net in the bar of the Hyatt Universal Hotel. 'Shelia?' 'Michael?'

ney circled each other like wary soldiers on either side of a battlefield. She was California pretty with the requisite tanned body, deep-dish tits exhibited in a low-cut dress, and long sexy legs. 'Shall we go into the restaurant?' Michael asked, surreptitiously checking her out. 'Good idea,' she replied, sliding off the bar stool exhibiting a dangerous amount of creamy thigh.

A hostess escorted them to a table. Michael ordered his usual non-alcoholic beer, while Shelia settled for vodka tonic. When her drink arrived she held it with both hands toying suggestively with the stem of her glass. 'Amber tells me you and Quincy were detectives together in New York,' she said. His eyes dropped to her breasts. 'And she told me you're an actress.'

'I've done one *Murder She Wrote*, two lines in a Cl

Eastwood movie and seven commercials. My agent says I'm almost ready to break through. Lately I've been thinking about hiring a manager, it's the smart thing to do.'

He tried to look interested. 'Really?'

'My nutritionist has a client who hired a manager and her career took off immediately. It's worth the extra ten per cent.'

'It is?'

'Yes, Michael. How much do you know about show business?' Her long fingers continued to rub the stem of the glass.

Jesus! Did she know she was turning him on? 'Not a lot.'

'I look at it this way, I either hire a manager, or I take it all off for *Playboy*. Now that's a *real* attention getter. Kim Basinger did it and never looked back. So did Joan Severance.'

'Who's Joan Severance?'

'Hmm . . .' she said, frowning, 'I guess it didn't have as much impact as she'd hoped, although she's on TV a lot.'

He'd forgotten what dating was like. Two people out on a crap shoot. It wasn't for him.

'I've done some *Playboy* test shots,' she said.

'Yeah?'

'They loved my body.'

He really wanted to be with a woman who stripped down to nothing for some jerk-off magazine.

'They said my breasts were perfect,' she announced proudly.

It was obvious Shelia knew nothing about the double murder and his missing child. That was fine with him, because he had no desire to discuss it with a stranger, especially this stranger.

Dinner seemed interminable. Shelia continued to drone on about her career, while he listened, trying to pay attention, but nevertheless he couldn't help thinking about his little daughter and where she could possibly be. Thoughts of Bella consumed him. It would be that way until he found her.

Shelia ate a hearty meal, polishing off a shrimp cocktail, a

ordered a brandy and finally got around to asking him a couple of questions about himself. He answered briefly. Crass as it might seem, he wasn't out on a blind date to start a relationship. Quincy was right, he was out to get laid. Period. And it shouldn't be too difficult. He'd never had any trouble getting women into bed, in fact it was only too easy - his good looks did it every time. Women were suckers for handsome, they took one glance and simply couldn't resist. Sometimes it saddened him. Didn't they care about the person inside? He was so much more than just a glossy exterior. He had so many cravings, and yet there'd never been a woman who'd satisfied him emotionally.

Outside the restaurant Shelia said the magic word 'Would you like to come back to my place for coffee?'

Translation: *How about a fuck?*

'Yeah, that'd be nice,' he said.

She lived in a small one-bedroom apartment on Fountain Avenue with two angry-looking cats named Arnold and who prowled restlessly around the apartment glaring at with steely elongated eyes.

'I recently ended a steady relationship, how about Shelia asked, handing him a cup of instant coffee colourful Superman mug.

'Divorced,' he said, taking the coffee and sitting on the couch.

She sat down beside him. He took a gulp of the hot liquid, put the mug on the table and slid his arm around behind her, pulling her in for a long kiss. After a few moments of heavy kissing activity she got to her feet, took his hand, and pulled him silently into the bedroom.

It wasn't until they fell on top of her bed locked in a steamy embrace that he unhooked her bra and realized that what he'd thought were magnificent breasts were actually silicone implants. Easy enough to tell - they felt unreal - like a couple of solid plastic beach balls. If he wasn't so horny he would've lost his hard-on. As it was he hadn't gotten laid in months so there was no stopping him now.

She thrust a hard nipple into his mouth. He sucked for a moment before groping for his wallet and removing the condom he'd been carrying for a while.

Shelia was already going for his nipple, pulling it down with an expert's touch.

He handed her the rubber. 'Here, sweetheart, you put it on,' he suggested in what he hoped was an encouraging fashion.

To his dismay she missed it completely on one side of him. 'Those things, we're both safe - who needs it?'

Oh, shit! This AIDS thing had him very nervous. 'Uh... I'd feel happier,' he mumbled.

'I know how to make *you* feel happier, baby,' she crooned, and with that her mouth descended on him, going to work like a dentist's suction cup.

Christ! She wasn't giving him time to enjoy it. He came so fast he felt like he was back in grade school!

As soon as it was over he wanted out, but Shelia had other ideas. Throwing off the rest of her clothes, she lay back spread-eagled on the bed and commanded in an I-take-no-prisoners voice, 'Eat me, baby, eat me!'

He stared at her muff, a neat little strip of brown public it shaved into submission. Whatever happened to good old ishy triangles?

'The uh... the shrimp,' he said vaguely, 'I gotta feeling it is agreed with me.'

'What?'

He was already zipping up and getting off the bed. 'I'd better finish this another time. I'm not feeling good.'

She wasn't pleased. In fact she was furious.

He made a daring escape, reached the street and saw his car for a moment, leaning his arms on the steering wheel. Sometimes he understood why paying for it was a rougher alternative. You didn't have to buy the clothes, have to them talk, and you certainly didn't have to ~~have to~~.

Even more important, if you wanted to ~~have a~~ ~~hooker~~ there wasn't a hooker on earth who would ~~accept~~.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

☆

Bobby received an advance copy of *Style Wars*. His photograph on the cover was arresting. He'd allowed their star photographer to capture him stepping naked from the shower – although of course you couldn't see the goods because he was emerging from a frosted shower door and his pertinent bits were hidden. However, it was quite obvious he was bare-assed naked. The photographer – a manic woman with frizzed red hair and a seductive personality – had talked him into it. She'd been so persuasive and full of positive energy he'd agreed. After all, Sly had posed naked for the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and Demi Moore made a habit of it. He'd wanted the photo to make a statement. Boy, did it make a statement!

Seeing it in full colour on the front of a national magazine was somewhat startling. He almost laughed aloud – it was a kick. At least his body looked buffed and ready for anything, all that jogging and working out had paid dividends.

The caption on the front of the magazine read in bold red letters *BOBBY RUSH – BODY OF THE YEAR*. And underneath, in smaller print:

*Bobby Rush moves in and muscles
Dad straight out of the picture*
by KENNEDY CHASE.

That didn't thrill him, his publicist had assured him there would be no mention of his father.

He picked up the intercom and buzzed his secretary. 'Beth, get me Elspeth on the line,' he said, drumming his fingertips impatiently on the desk.

'She was around earlier, Bobby, shall I try to page her?'

'Do that. Have her come straight to my office.'

'A.s.a.p.'

With a certain amount of trepidation he opened the magazine and turned to the article about him. There were more pictures, six of them to be exact. He studied the photos first, steeling himself to read the copy because he'd had a feeling – ever since he'd realized Kennedy had interviewed him under false pretences – that it was not going to be flattering, especially when she'd failed to return his phone calls.

Giving interviews to the press was a treacherous path to travel at the best of times – with this devious lady it was probably a minefield.

OK. So now he was going to read it. Take a deep breath, get past the headline and see what she has to say.

Bobby Rush – a paler clone of Big Daddy, Jerry – thinks he's hot stuff, and he struts it all the way around the studio he acts like he owns. This is about the only time Bobby acts, because baring it all seems to be his skill du jour. What a great tight ass! And don't we all know it. Daddy would be proud.

It got worse.

Why is Bobby Rush a star? Could it be that Big Daddy used his considerable clout in a town so open to a touch of creative nepotism to get him where he is today?

He groaned and threw the offending magazine across the room just as Beth popped her head around the door. 'Something wrong, Bobby?'

He attempted to make light of it although he was churning

th looked suitably sympathetic. 'I'm sorry. You're sorry. Where the hell is Elspeth?' she's on her way.'

It was unfair. The entire interview was an unfounded attack on his integrity as an actor and as a man. Kennedy had been intimidated that the only reason he was a success was because of his famous connections, and she droned on endlessly about Jerry, and what a fucking icon he was. She should only know the truth. That he, Bobby Rush, was a success because of *his* hard work and nobody else's. That Jerry would have been happier if he'd stayed in his shadow for ever.

But no, Kennedy Chase wasn't interested in the truth. She'd tricked him into being interviewed and hadn't given him a chance.

He felt so betrayed, as far as he could remember he'd behaved perfectly decently towards the woman, and yet for some unknown reason she'd decided to trash him.

Elspeth entered his office with tightly drawn lips and a ferocious expression. She was carrying a copy of *Style Wars* which she waved in his face. 'I read it,' she said, before he could utter a word. 'I will *never* work with this magazine again. I am furious.'

She was furious, how about *him*, he was supposed to be the star around here.

'Elspeth,' he said evenly. 'How did this happen? I was under the impression we had assurances that they were not going to mention Jerry. That's why I co-operated on the pictures and gave them a day of my valuable time.'

'Do I know?' said Elspeth, as if it had absolutely nothing to do with her. 'Did you see what that bitch said about *me*? She described me as unprofessional.'

'I don't give a shit what she said about you,' he snapped. 'You're supposed to be in control of the press. What happened here?'

'I am *not* unprofessional,' Elspeth said heatedly. 'Do you think I can sue?'

'Concentrate on the subject at hand, which is *me*,' he said

jointedly. 'Everybody in town reads this magazine, I look like a total jerk.'

'It's not *my* fault,' Elspeth said, shaking her head as if to convince herself. 'I fixed up the first interview and you failed to show.'

'I failed to show because you failed to tell me about it.'

'Whatever,' Elspeth said vaguely. 'Kennedy Chase was supposed to come back and spend the day with you.'

'I told you what happened - you should have followed through. I knew when she didn't return my calls she was going for a kill.'

'I contacted the magazine,' Elspeth said. 'They assured me she had all the information she needed.'

'Sure she did,' he said bitterly. 'She combed through my clippings file, picked out everything negative, and decided the father connection was the way to go.'

'It's done now,' Elspeth said flatly. 'Too late to change anything.'

'Is that all you have to say?'

'You can't always have good press, Bobby.'

He was fast losing patience. 'I'm not getting through to you, am I? I went on your word, you let me down.'

'It won't happen again,' she said tightly. He had a strong urge to fire her, but he hadn't yet learned how to be ruthless. Growing up he'd watched his father do it plenty of times. The great Jerry Rush got off on firing people.

Can him, he's an asshole.

Give the dumb broad two weeks' money and throw her out.

Prick, get rid of him.

Yeah, Jerry was pretty good at booting people out.

Bobby closed the magazine and pushed it to the side of his desk. 'OK, Elspeth, I guess there's nothing I can do.'

'I guess not,' she said flatly.

He wanted her out of his office before he lost it. She didn't really give a shit, all she was concerned about was the way she'd been portrayed.

It had been a long day. In the morning he'd gone on a location scout. Later that afternoon she'd had a manicure.

'Hey,' he called after her. 'Thanks for caring.' Beth had been with him almost two years. She was loyal and efficient. He wished he could find a set assistant as smart as her. The girl he'd hired followed him around like an obedient dog. He had to tell her everything – she possessed no initiative. Once he started shooting he knew it wouldn't work out.

There was an alternative. Jordanna Levitt.

Yeah, sure, what a trip *that* would be. Spoiled Hollywood brat who thought she owned the world. He knew her type backwards, he'd grown up surrounded by them.

Jordanna had gotten hired because of Charlie Dollar. Who could say no to Charlie? He was the best actor of his generation, a true original. And whatever Charlie wanted Charlie got. When he'd asked Bobby to give Jordanna a job, he'd said yes immediately.

He'd hired her, but he hadn't seen her. Instead he'd palmed her off on Gary, who'd given her a tiny office in the downstairs production offices helping out in casting. Feeling generous, Bobby had also arranged jobs for both his brothers – Len in development, and Stan in accounting. If they screwed up they were out, but at least he'd given them a chance, which is more than Jerry Rush had given him. Still, he shouldn't complain, Jerry's total lack of interest had toughened him up and filled him with an unbeatable desire to succeed.

Score a major touchdown. He was exactly where he wanted to be.



Morton's was crowded as usual. The same old mix of studio heads, stars, producers and agents. The wannabees hovered at the bar waiting for a table, knowing they hadn't a hope in hell of getting seated anywhere near the front of the exclusive restaurant. The *mâitre d'* juggled his customers with his usual aplomb, guiding Bobby to a side table – near the front, of course – where Sharleen and Mac waited.

Sharleen was on producer alert – primed and glossed and

...mmering with steamy sensuality. She wore a clinging
...ss, dangerously low-cut, and her pale red hair was piled
...ually atop her head, a few loose curls escaping around her
...etty face.

'Bobby,' she murmured in a low husky voice. 'How nice
to see you again.'

'Nice to see you, too, Sharleen. You're looking sensational.'
She sat up a touch straighter, flashing a megawatt smile
and plenty of cleavage. 'Thank you, Bobby.'

'Hey,' Mac said, greeting him with a wave. 'Don't know
about you, but I'm beat.'

'Same,' Bobby said.
Sharleen pouted. 'I can see you two will be great com-
pany,' she said, 'I suppose I'll have to entertain myself.'

'That'll be the day,' Mac said with a dry laugh, already
fantasizing about the drive home.

'So,' Sharleen said brightly. 'I understand you're having a
problem casting Sienna.'

'We'll find someone,' Mac said quickly, hoping to shut her
up. They were consumed with the movie all day, tonight he
wanted to sit back and forget about it.

Sharleen concentrated on Bobby. 'I love the script,' she
said, her almond-colour eyes burning with intensity. 'I read
so many, but I couldn't put this one down. The characters
are beautifully fleshed out, so full of anger and pain and real
sexuality. It's very . . . European.'

'Yeah, it's a good script,' Bobby agreed.

'Not good - devastating,' Sharleen said passionately. 'And
I have a sensational idea that will make it even better.'

Mac was surprised. 'You do?' he said, wondering what
Sharleen was cooking up now.

'Yes, I do,' she said, still concentrating on Bobby.

Bobby waved at a couple of agents across the room.
'What's your idea, Sharleen?' he asked casually.

She leaned across the table and he couldn't keep his eyes
off her very impressive breasts.

'How old are you, Bobby?' she asked, running her tongue
across her lips.

He laughed. 'How *old* am I?'

She sat back. 'It's a simple question.'

'Thirty-two.'

'Hmm . . . we're the same age.'

Yeah, give or take a year or two, Mac thought. His darling wife was thirty-five, soon to be thirty-six. She was an actress. There would be no cake with tell-tale candles.

'Really?' Bobby said.

'Yes, really,' Sharleen replied. 'And we look pretty damn good together.'

Mac had a horrible feeling he knew what was coming next. He wasn't wrong.

'Bobby,' Sharleen said intently. 'Think about it. *I* could play Sienna. I'm perfect. And what's more, I'll do it because I love the script, even though Spielberg is interested in me for his next movie.'

Mac wanted to smack her. How dare she embarrass him this way. 'For fuck's sake, Sharleen - ' he began.

'That's OK,' Bobby said easily. 'Sharleen's right, we'd look great on the screen together, and maybe in the future we'll come up with a script tailored for us. A comedy perhaps. I bet you're terrific at comedy, Sharleen, and nobody ever sees beyond your spectacular body. Am I right?'

Sharleen realized that somehow this conversation had veered off in the wrong direction. 'Well . . . uh . . . yes, Bobby. I've always wanted to do a comedy. Kind of a Marilyn piece, we share the same timing. But about *Thriller Eyes* - '

'Wouldn't work,' Bobby said firmly. 'Sienna has to be in her early twenties or the plot falls to pieces.'

'But I thought—'

'So I'll put the idea out there, Sharleen,' he said smoothly, interrupting her. 'You and me together in a comedy. It'll be a blast.' He clicked his fingers for a waiter. 'Hey, can we get a menu, I'm starving.'

They rode in silence, the powerful Rolls belting around the winding curves of Sunset full speed ahead. Mac couldn't hold back any longer — blow job or not he had to say what was on his mind. 'That was a cunt stunt to pull.'

Sharleen took the innocent route. 'What stunt?'
'That shit about you and Bobby looking so great together and being the same age and all. The same age my ass!'

'I'm three years older than him, that's nothing.' 'The *'I'm the director of Thriller Eyes,'* Mac said sharply. 'The fucking director for chrissakes. How do you think it looks when my wife starts canvassing the star producer for the lead role and I'm sitting there like Joe Schmuck comes to Hollywood?'

'I'm sorry,' Sharleen said, not sounding sorry at all. 'But I knew if I mentioned it to you there was no way you'd consider it.'

'Damn right.'

'So you can't blame me for trying. It's a wonderful psychotic role. I'd be fantastic in it.'

'You'd also be at least ten years too old.'

'Nonsense. A few adjustments to the script would take care of that minor problem.'

'Minor problem, Sharleen? I don't think so. The script hinges around the fact that the girl is so young.'

She pursed her luscious lips. 'You're being difficult, Mac. You don't want me in the movie because I'm your wife.'

'I'd have nothing against it if you were right for it.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Why not?'

'Because you wouldn't want to watch me naked in bed with Bobby Rush.'

'I'm a professional, Sharleen. When I'm on the set nothing else matters except the movie.'

'Easy for you to say now,' she taunted, still using her low sexy voice. 'When there's no way you'd consider me for the part.'

'I'd consider you if you were right.'

'It's a hot script. All those explicit love scenes, the sex, the

nudity . . . And the ending is so intensely emotional. No,' she shook her head knowledgeably. 'You couldn't take it.'

'Yes, Sharleen. I could.'

'So test me for it. Let's see if it *could* work.' As she spoke her hand descended on his thigh and very slowly crept up to his crotch.

Oh yeah. Instant hard-on. She did it to him every time.

'What do you think, sweetheart?' she murmured, unzipping his fly.

'I . . . think . . . you're . . . a . . . very . . . exciting . . . woman.'

'Good. Because I'm about to excite the hell out of you.' And with that she sprung him free and bent her head.

Dreams do come true. Sunset Boulevard. Sharleen giving him a blow job. He was one lucky man.

Just as he was about to come, a police siren blasted them from behind, lights flashed, and a deep male voice boomed through a loudspeaker. 'Pull over to the side. Do it now!'

Oh, shit! Instead of an explosion it was a mere fizzle. Talk about a disappointment.

Swearing under his breath, he swerved the Rolls into the side of the curb while Sharleen sat up, took out her compact and immediately began applying fresh lipstick. Nothing fazed Sharleen.

The police car pulled up behind them and a good-looking cop emerged.

Everyone is good-looking in LA, Mac thought sourly, stuffing himself back into his pants. They all came to town with the intention of becoming movie stars. Too bad hardly any of them made it.

The good-looking policeman strolled over cop fashion and shone a flashlight into Mac's face, almost blinding him. 'Step out of the car, sir. And, lady, you too.'

'Officer,' Mac said, trying to sound authoritative, even though he was sitting there totally unzipped and feeling somewhat insecure. 'Can you please tell me what the matter is?'

'Driving in two lanes will do it every time,' the cop

drawled. 'Your car was zigzagging all over the place. I'm going to have to ask you to take a breathalyser test. Please exit your vehicle.'

Satisfied that her make-up was once again perfect, Sharleen spoke up. 'Officer,' she purred, 'I'm Sharleen Wynn.'

His flashlight zoomed in her direction and hovered on her face. 'It's our wedding anniversary,' Sharleen continued in the same sexy tone. 'And perhaps it was indiscreet of me, but I was merely giving my husband . . . how shall I say it? An early anniversary present. I'm *so* sorry if I got carried away . . . causing him to become . . . overheated. Next time I'll wait until we're home. Promise.'

The officer was in love. Boy, did he have a story to tell the guys! 'Uh . . . Miss Wynn,' he managed. 'That's . . . uh . . . not the smartest way to behave.'

'I know, Officer,' she said, fluttering her eyelashes in an age-old flirting stance. 'And I won't do it again. I promise. Can we go now?'

He was almost speechless, not quite. 'Uh . . . Miss Wynn, maybe you'll give me an autograph?'

'Certainly,' she said, taking his pen and magnanimously signing the back of his notebook with a flourish. 'Thank you for being so understanding. I really do appreciate it.'

'Don't mention it, ma'am. You be careful now.'

'Oh, I will.'

Mac started the car and they took off.

'Turn up Stone Canyon,' Sharleen said urgently. 'It's the wrong way -'

'Now!'

He turned right on to Stone Canyon.

'Pull into that driveway over there. The dark one,' she ordered.

'Sharleen -'

He heard the rustle of silk as she began to divest herself of her clothes. This was one crazy broad and he loved it! Quickly he pulled into the darkened driveway and stopped the car.

'Get into the back,' she whispered, peeling off her pantihose. She didn't have to ask twice.

By the time they arrived on the back seat Sharleen was completely naked, and they started going at it like a couple of horny teenagers. 'Ohhh, Mac, you're the best – the *crème de la crème* – the absolute best . . .' she murmured heatedly, her hands roaming over his chest.

Sharleen had a knack for saying exactly the right thing at exactly the right moment.

Then she climbed on top of him, riding him like a stallion, her fine tits in his face, her musky scent all over him.

This time when he came it was a monster.

Marriage to Sharleen was never dull.

partners seemed like OK guys. She sensed that one of them, Tyrone Houston, was on the verge of asking her out, obviously he didn't know she was currently living with Charlie Dollar.

Tyrone was very black and very sexy. If he asked she'd definitely be tempted – only tempted though, because now she was in a monogamous relationship and she wanted to see if it could work.

Of course, Charlie wouldn't care, he was that kind of guy. Yesterday she'd arrived home to find his ex-girlfriend and his three-year-old child in residence. 'You know Dahlia, don't you, kiddo?' he'd asked, stoned as usual. Then he'd gestured to his son. 'An' this is Sport. They'll be stayin' a couple of weeks while their place gets painted.'

No, she didn't know Dahlia, but she certainly knew of her. Dahlia Summers was a regal-looking forty-year-old talented actress with long straight hair and a stern expression. Gossip had it that she and Charlie had been an on-off item for ten years, and when she'd pressured him to marry her he'd promptly bought her a house and moved her out.

'Hello,' Dahlia had said, not cracking a smile.

'Hi,' Jordanna had replied, thinking that this was a strange situation, but one she could cope with.

They'd all eaten dinner together in the big dark dining room. It was an odd set-up, and not one she'd particularly enjoyed. If Dahlia stayed longer than two weeks she was definitely going to get restless.

'How about breakfast?' Charlie yelled from the bedroom. 'I'm ordering bacon and sausages. Want some?'

'No,' she shouted back, 'I don't eat pigs.'

'You could've fooled me,' he chortled.

One thing about Charlie, he had absolutely no ego.

At the studio she sat in her cubby-hole office sorting through endless photographs and résumés, shuffling them from one pile to another, cross-eyed with boredom. As soon as Florrie Fisher, assistant to Nanette Lipsky, the casting director for Bobby Rush Productions, put her head around the door. Florrie was in her thirties, plump and cheerful with

'I think I can manage that.'

Ah, if only Nanette knew how many actors she'd had in and out, in and out. She stifled a wild giggle.

'Did I say something funny?' Nanette demanded, her left eye twitching out of control.

'Not at all,' Jordanna replied, thinking that this was a double whammy, not only would she get to be face to face with Bobby, but she'd see Mac too. She recalled that he'd been sensational in bed, although she'd only been seventeen at the time and not nearly as experienced as she was now.

Jordanna Levitt. Expert on men.

Stifling another giggle she followed Nanette upstairs.



Two hours later she was really into it. She felt important and useful and, most of all, she was enjoying herself, and she wasn't even stoned!

They were a team. Bobby, Mac, Nanette and herself. They were focused on the final casting of *Thriller Eyes* and nothing else mattered.

Jordanna led the talent in, read a scene or two with them if it was required, and then ushered them on their way. She soon picked up the rhythm of how to do it without hurting anyone's feelings.

Middle-aged actresses were the worst to shift, especially if they had a half-assed name. They came in with plenty of attitude, the best part of their physical anatomy on show, and a yen to greet either Bobby or Mac with a big wet kiss.

Jordanna quickly learned how to circumvent that little piece of activity. She stationed herself between the couch where Bobby and Mac sat, and the chair in the middle of the room where the talent parked themselves. She did not move until everyone was settled.

'Very clever,' Mac said admiringly, when she'd done it a couple of times. 'You learn fast.'

She knew that after fifteen minutes she had Bobby's attention. Good. It was about time he realized she existed.

Reading through scenes with the actors and actresses was fun. She got to play a variety of characters — male and female. Her only regret was that she hadn't taken the time to study the script beforehand. It seemed to be an interesting piece of material, but then Mac had a knack of making the right choices. His movies might not all be box-office winners, but his films were always intriguing and on the edge.

The last interview of the day was a long-haired young actor in ripped jeans and cowboy boots. He was reading for the minor role of a security guard. The scene took place between him and the character of Sienna.

It was a short seductive piece, and Jordanna gave it her all, enjoying the twists and turns of the cutting dialogue. When they were finished, Mac and Bobby conferred for a few minutes, then requested they read the scene again. Jordanna and the actor obliged.

Another conference. Another repeat performance. They must like him, Jordanna thought, taking another glance at the young actor. He did have a certain charisma that was quite sexy.

When she led him from the room he was vibrating with nervous energy.

She eyed him up and down. 'Pumped, huh?' He cracked his knuckles. 'You got it! They had me read the scene three times, they must've thought I was good.'

'I guess so.'

'You *guess*? Can't you tell?' 'Hey, I'm new at this.'

'How about finding out what they say and meeting me for coffee at the place across the street?' What did she have to lose? She was in no rush to go home on account of Charlie's house guests.

'Sure,' she said, 'see you there in fifteen minutes.'

'I'll be waiting,' he said, flashing a Midnight Cowboy smile. Nice teeth. An even better butt.

She hurried back into the interview room. 'That's it,' she said, 'he was the last one.'

Bobby, Mac and Nanette were all staring at her.

'What? What have I done?' she asked anxiously, sure that she'd screwed up in some major way.

'Jordanna,' Mac said at last, 'have you ever thought about taking up an acting career?'



You'll never amount to anything. Do you understand me? You're nothing – a roach – lower than a roach – you're a fucking roach turd. Do you understand me?

Yes. He understood his father. He was ten years old and had understood that he deserved his father's eternal rage. He didn't know why. It was merely a fact of life. Something he took for granted.

His mother never sprung to his defence. She merely nodded, as if every word his father uttered was the truth and nothing more. She nodded in agreement, and stared at him with mournful eyes. And when his father went out she held him to her bosom and crooned old love songs to him in a low shaky voice.

Before she'd married his father she'd been a Las Vegas showgirl, and she hung on to her show-business memories as if she was Marilyn – sometimes telling tales of her great triumphs with men.

The Man didn't know much about feelings. Women were whores, he knew that. Bitches and whores.

This is what his father had to say about women. Never, never, let 'em get to you. They're all cheap hookers an' don't you forget it, 'cause if you do, they'll screw you into an early grave an' leave your heart in fuckin' ribbons. They got make-up on their faces an' witchcraft in their two-timing cunts. Remember what I told you, son, an' you'll never go wrong.'

Yes, Dad.

And Dad was right. Women were the betrayers. Women had

to be punished. And he was doing an excellent job as he drove down the freeway heading for his third victim.

Of course if he'd listened to his father he'd never have gotten involved with The Girl. She'd lured him with those blue eyes, and that quirky innocent smile, pulling him closer, tempting him, encouraging him. Until one day he'd accepted her invitation to be seduced . . .

Well, he'd shown her. He'd shown everyone.

Sometimes it puzzled him that he was punished for doing what any sane man would do. He'd put his hands around her soft white throat and choked the breath out of her. Squeezed tight until she'd flopped in his arms like a useless rag doll.

She'd deserved it.

Bitch.

Whore.

A white van, driven by a thin-faced youth with a wasted blonde draped all over him, passed by on the inside lane. The girl leaned over and honked the horn, then the van cut in front of The Man, causing him to sharply apply his brakes. The van speeded up and took off, its occupants doubled over with laughter.

The Man didn't carry a gun. Perhaps he should. If he'd had a gun he could have killed scum like the two people in the van. He could have blown them away. Sent them to join The Girl in the place she rested - repenting her sins.

Ha! If he had a gun he could do a lot of things.

He put it on his shopping list.

The off-ramp beckoned him, telling him he was near his destination. Pasadena. A peaceful place. When his list was taken care of he would have to find somewhere decent to live. Pasadena wouldn't be bad. The tree-lined streets were wide and pleasant enough. He could see himself living there.

He drove down the street full of confidence because he knew exactly where he was going. Previously he'd checked out the house where his victim lived in a downstairs apartment. He'd even gained access and looked around at his leisure while she was out at work. She was a secretary at a local law firm. No more dreams of Hollywood and stardom, she'd got out of the business seven years

ago, right after the trial. Sensible girl. Hollywood was nothing but a bargain basement filled with second-hand talent. A cesspool of out-of-control egos.

He should know. He'd seen the things that went on.

Seven years ago he could have become a star if things had gone as planned. He could have been as big as Steven Seagal.

But no, it wasn't meant to be. The Girl had ruined everything, and the traitors surrounding her had helped.

But they were paying for their bad behaviour.
One by one they were paying.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



'There's a case I want you to come in on,' Quincy said as they jogged through the park.

'I got things to do,' Michael replied restlessly. 'People to talk to.'

'Yeah, things to do. Meanwhile, how you gonna pay your rent? Listen, Mike, if *you* don't join me, I gotta hire somebody else.'

He knew Quincy was right, he had to work - if just to occupy his thoughts with something other than Bella. 'So what are you offering, a partnership?'

Quincy threw up his arms. 'Don't let's get carried away. First you'll work with me a couple of weeks, see if you like it. Then we can talk partnership.'

'I won't like anything until I find my kid.'

'I know that,' Quincy said, already out of breath. 'We'll keep doing our best.' He almost tripped. 'Jeez, can we stop? I'm bustin' a gut here.'

'You're out of shape, Q.'

'I'm older than you.'

'No excuse.'

'I'm gonna be fuckin' fifty!'

'All the more reason to stay fit.'

They rested by a tree. Quincy doubled over, groaning and catching his breath.

'OK, so I'm in,' Michael said, making a fast decision.

...ingy ...ed up. 'Jeez! It's about time you said

'Tell me about the case.'

There's this daughter of big-shot billionaire Franklyn

Sanderson. He owns TV stations across the country. You've

probably heard of him.'

'I know who he is.'

Anyway, the girl - Marjory - she's been receiving a series of letters threatening to slit her throat or kill her in some godawful way.'

'How many?'

'One or two a week for the last few months.'

'Has Franklyn contacted the police?'

'No publicity. This is strictly low-key. That's why he brought me in.'

'What do you have?'

'Not much. The letters are postmarked from all over the city. The girl's frightened.'

'How specific are the letters?'

'Look, I gotta go see her later today. She moved back home with her old man. Come with me, I'd like your take on it.'

Michael agreed. He had to do something to keep himself busy.

☆ ☆ ☆

The Sanderson estate, set way back off Sunset Boulevard, was impressive. Two guards manned the heavy ornate gates, while three fierce-looking Rottweilers patrolled the grounds. Quincy stopped his car and produced identification before they gained entry.

'This is like fucking Fort Knox,' Michael remarked as they drove up a long winding driveway, passing an elegant fountain in the forecourt, and acres of immaculately kept grounds. The house up ahead resembled a slightly smaller version of a stately European palace.

A valet ushered them from the car while a formally dressed butler waited at the front door.

'This way, sir,' said the butler in a clipped and very precise English accent.

Michael tried to appear at ease as he entered the magnificent mansion, but he couldn't help thinking to himself, *Holy shit! If the guys from the neighbourhood could see me now. How people live in California!*

They followed the butler into an enormous living room tastefully furnished with French period furniture and ornate antiques.

'Kindly take a seat,' the butler said, looking down his nose at them.

Michael roamed around, taking in his surroundings, marvelling at the opulence of it all. He whistled softly. 'Some place!'

'Yeah,' Quincy replied. 'You get used to it after a time — most of the big shots live this way.'

'They do?'

'It's one of the perks of bein' in the movie and TV biz.'

'I couldn't imagine living like this.'

'Fortunately, my friend, you'll never have to.'

'Yeah, remind me.'

A thin plain girl entered the room dressed all in white. She had long fair hair and downcast eyes.

Quincy got up and went over to greet her. 'Marjory, how you feeling today?'

'I received another letter,' she said, in a barely audible voice.

'Do you have it with you?'

She glanced nervously at Michael. 'Who's he?'

'My colleague. Michael Scorsini. He's helping out.'

Her pale-blue eyes stayed fixed on Michael. 'Does Daddy know?'

'I spoke to him, told him I was bringing somebody in. Michael and me were partners in New York.'

She thrust a piece of paper at Quincy. 'This is the latest.'

Michael watched her closely. Boy, she was agitated. She couldn't keep still, her hands in constant motion pulling at her hair, her dress, anything she could get hold of. Quincy read the letter, scrawled in red ink on a lined page torn out of a school notebook. The handwriting was barely legible. He handed it to Michael, who scanned it quickly.

*R_i ch P r i N^{ce} ss, y o u w i l l
d i e s o o n. Y o u r m o n e y c a n't
s a v e y o u.*

'Where's the envelope?' Quincy said.

'I have it,' she replied, her eyes darting around the room. Fishing in the pocket of her dress she passed a crumpled envelope to him.

Quincy took it, weighing it in his hands. 'Your father her today?'

She shook her head. 'No, Daddy's out of town.'

'So you're by yourself?'

'There's eight servants and two guards on the premises,' she stated blankly.

What a way to live, Michael thought, staring at the skinny little thing. No wonder she was scared, obviously she had not grown up in the real world, and the letters came as a rude shock.

'When do you think you'll find this man?' Marjory asked with a frightened expression.

'I'm working on it,' Quincy said confidently. 'Building up a profile. You know, handwriting analysis - putting together where the letters were sent from, all that stuff. It takes time, but we'll nail the sonofab - er - I mean the perpetrator eventually. The good thing is you're safe as long as you're here. And if you need anything at all I'm only a phone call away.'

'Thank you, Mr Robbins. That's very reassuring.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Later that day Michael met with Rosa. She'd called and invited him down to the television station to sort through some of the letters they'd received after his interview.

'This is it, Michael,' she said, leading him into her office and indicating a huge sackful of letters. 'Your fan mail. I thought you'd want to take a look through it.'

'Fan mail?' he asked with a note of surprise.

'I told you we had a fantastic response to the programme.'

'Any information that could help me?'

'I really don't know. A couple of kids in the office read them, whether there's anything pertinent is up to you to find out.'

He was daunted by the big sackload of letters. 'I'll take 'em home,' he decided.

'You know, I've been thinking,' she said, moving around her desk. 'Isn't it about time you got out and had some fun?'

He laughed drily. 'You sound like my best friends. They're always after me to do just that.'

'I have a suggestion. My girlfriend, Kennedy Chase, is smart, attractive and available. She writes for a magazine, and it occurred to me you might make an interesting couple. How about I fix the two of you up?'

'How about *not*.'

'Huh?'

'I'm not into blind dates. In fact, right now I'm not into dating at all.'

'It wouldn't exactly be a blind date. I've told you what she looks like.'

'Thanks, but I'm not going out right now.'

'Hmm,' Rosa said thoughtfully. 'That makes two of you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I told her about you — she doesn't want to go out either.'

He laughed. 'So what are you trying to promote here?'

She smiled back. 'Apparently nothing.'

'Listen,' he said, thinking she was a very attractive woman. 'I appreciate your concern.'

'Ah,' she said wistfully. 'If I was single, Michael, I'd be more than concerned.'

'You're married?' he asked lightly.

'Taken,' she replied, wishing for a moment that she wasn't

'Sounds serious.'

'I'm hoping.'

They smiled at each other and Rosa decided that Kenner had made a big mistake turning this one down. He was a great-looking guy with a very sexy edge. Not to mention

mouth – full lips, sensual lips . . .

'Michael,' she said, pulling herself together, 'it's time to do a follow-up piece on you before people forget. This is my suggestion, take the letters home, read through them, then give me a call by the end of the week and we'll set up another appearance.'

He was unconvinced. 'If you think it'll help.'

'I'm sure it will,' she said, very positively. 'People love watching real-life dramas, and your story is extremely appealing. The more attention we can bring to it the better. You should feel fortunate you've got this opportunity to be on television. Actually,' she added playfully, 'you should be kissing my ass.'

'Rosa, if I was in a better mood, I'm sure there's nothing I'd like better.'

She laughed flirtatiously. God! She must be crazy to let this one go. 'Ohhh, Michael, I bet you can be a bad one.'

They exchanged smiles again and he left, stopping at a small Italian restaurant he frequented for dinner. He sat outside at a table for one and ordered a simple plate of pasta. The pretty waitress was all over him. 'Alone again, Michael?' she asked, with a definite come-on in her voice.

'That's the way I like it,' he replied, thinking that there would be no women, his experience with Shelia had made him realize that unless it was meaningful it simply wasn't worth it. And how could anything be meaningful until he'd found Bella?

Or her body . . .

The thought that his daughter might be dead haunted him. It lurked in the shadows of his mind and refused to go away.

He ate his pasta and drove home to his apartment, stopping at the supermarket for a carton of milk and two bottles of fresh orange juice.

Once home he took the big sack of letters and tipped them out on to the floor, staring at them for a while before sorting them into neat stacks.

Somewhere in one of the piles of envelopes there might be valuable information. He could hope, couldn't he?

By seven o'clock he was reading.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Jordanna was in a state of shock. She could not believe that Mac Brooks and Bobby Rush were actually considering testing her for the role of Sienna in *Thriller Eyes*. It was like one of those insane dreams come true.

She would never forget the look on their faces when she walked back into the room. The three of them sitting there staring at her — Bobby, Mac and Nanette.

And then Mac came out with the famous words. 'Jordanna, have you ever thought about taking up an acting...?'

'Who, me? No way,' she replied, flip as ever, although of course she had.

'You're good,' Bobby said. 'You're really good.'

She barely glanced in his direction. 'Hey, I was just following the actors,' she said, gathering up photos and résumés, trying to appear disinterested.

'Here's the thing, Jordanna,' Mac said. 'We're searching for someone to play Sienna. It's a challenging role, and so far we haven't come up with the right actress. You could be her.'

'I could?' she gulped.

'Yes, you could.'

'What we thought,' Bobby said, joining in, 'is that we should run a test on you.'

'Test me?'

'I don't see anybody else in here.'

'Well, yeah, sure,' she said, attempting to sound nonchalant.

ant, although her stomach was jumping butterflies. Dammit, she was probably coming across like a total idiot. What was it about Bobby that made her completely lose it?

Mac nodded seriously. 'It's worth a shot, after all, you come from a talented family.'

That was the trouble — her talented family. Like Jordan said, how could she ever live up to the great Levitt reputation? On screen her mother, Lillianne, had been an incandescent presence, a beauty that made grown men drool. And a wonderful actress, too.

'Uh, let me think about it,' she mumbled.

'We'll do the same,' Mac said.

She left the office as fast as she could, full of mixed emotions. She almost forgot about Midnight Cowboy waiting across the street, but he hadn't forgotten her, he was right there when she drove out of the studio gates, waving anxiously.

'What did they think of me?' he demanded.

'They, uh . . . they liked you very much.'

'Did they think I was good? What did they say about my reading?'

'They loved it,' she lied, not wanting to tell him it was her they were interested in.

His words were tripping over each other. 'Have I got the part? I know it's only a small role, but Mac Brooks is an ace director, and I'd sure get off on working with Bobby Rush. Who's set for the girl?'

'Beats me,' she said vaguely.

She had a coffee with him while she mulled things over. Should she tell Charlie? Or her father? What if her test was terrible and they hated her?

Oh, God, what had she got herself into? This was ridiculous.

Midnight Cowboy was on a roll talking about himself. He told her he'd come to California four years ago, done some modelling, then a few one-liners in movies. He stated that he wanted to be as big as Clint Eastwood. 'And I will be,' he

*Sure, baby, she thought, and Clinton will grow flowers out
is ass and boogie down Main Street.*

Eventually he made his pitch. Normally she would have said yes because he was real hot looking with the requisite tight butt. But wasn't she supposed to be improving her life? Gotta stop sleeping with actors. Especially the tight butt brigade.

She jotted down his phone number, told him she'd call him later, and drove back to Charlie's.

The place was buzzing. Charlie was entertaining. He sat in the middle of his old brown couch, smoking a joint, surrounded by hangers-on. Sport, his three-year-old son, crouched at his feet playing with an electric train set. Dahlia lingered at the bar sipping Perrier, her face long and mournful.

'I didn't know you were having a party tonight,' Jordanna said accusingly, thinking the least he could have done was warn her.

Charlie smiled dreamily, his eyes on a space trip. 'Hey, kiddo, it's only a little celebration - for Sport.'

'He's three, Charlie,' she pointed out. 'Shouldn't the guests be younger?'

He chuckled and offered her a drag on his joint.

She declined. She'd been dying to tell him her news and now he was too stoned to care.

'I'm going up to my room,' she said. Like he gave a shit, he was too busy playing genial host to a room full of drugged-out freeloaders.

Once in her room, she slammed the door, put on a CD of Madonna singing 'Bad Girl', and sat back on her bed. Opportunity knocks. Was she going to open the door or not?

Picking up the script of *Thriller Eyes* she started reading. The role of Sienna was wild. In fact, if Sienna hadn't turned out to be a psychotic killer at the end of the piece, she would have been a lot like her.

Reaching for a yellow marker she went through the script

again, highlighting certain passages, saying the words aloud, getting deep into the character.

Wistfully she thought it would have been nice if Charlie was around to read with her, but no, he was too busy partying, and she had no desire to join in.

Madonna gave way to Prince singing 'Cream'. The music drowned out the noise coming from downstairs. She glanced out the window and observed that the party was getting bigger. Valet parkers were shuttling cars back and forth, and there were now two catering trucks parked around the side.

Charlie should have told her he was planning a party; she did live there, after all.

Around midnight she decided to venture downstairs and check out the action.

There were people everywhere, spilling out on to the terrace, crowding the bar, hanging out around the swimming-pool. The smell of pot was heavy in the air. A skinny girl - star of a TV sitcom - sat cross-legged on the floor popping pills, while a well-known country singer in snakeskin boots and matching vest snorted cocaine from a side table. Belly-dancers undulated their way through the crowd, and the noise was deafening.

She didn't know anybody except Cheryl, who held court on the big leather couch surrounded by two bimbo-type blondes, an under-age redhead and several attentive men. Charlie was nowhere to be seen.

She went over. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'Hi,' Cheryl said vaguely. 'I wondered where you were.'

'Conducting a little business?' Jordanna asked, indicating the girls gathered around her.

'Socializing,' Cheryl replied, sipping a tequila on the rocks. 'It's good to socialize.'

'So I see.'

'Is it true you're living here now?'

'Yes.'

'Thanks for telling me. I had to find out from Shep.'

'I never see you any more. Cheryl, you're always too busy.'

'Business comes first.'

'I guess business is booming.'

'In this town - always,' Cheryl said, attracting the attention of a waiter. 'Another tequila rocks,' she said tersely before turning back to Jordanna. 'You seen Grant?'

'Is he here, too?'

'Over by the bar.'

She had no intention of hanging around Cheryl and her merry band of hookers, so she fought her way through to the bar, where Grant had a Chinese girl pressed up against the wall. They were exchanging tongues.

'Grant,' she said, tapping him on the shoulder.

He stared at her with a foggy expression.

'Jordanna,' she said, adding a sarcastic, 'Remember me? We grew up together.'

A stupid grin spread across his face. 'Yeah, Jordy . . . How's it goin?'

He was stoned out of his head, and when Grant was stoned he was bad news. A couple of years ago he'd had a serious heroin problem. His father had found out and forced him into Rehab. When he'd gotten out he'd been fairly straight. Now he was obviously back on the merry-go-round.

The Chinese girl pulled him back towards her, wiggling her tongue in his face. 'C'mon, honey baby, let's get into it,' he crooned.

'See ya, Jordy,' Grant said, his stupid grin firmly in place.

She wandered around the party searching for Charlie. Where the hell was he? And why did he want all these stoned people in his house?

She poked her head around the kitchen door. Chaos reigned as the caterers did their stuff. Mrs Willet was nowhere to be seen, she'd probably taken off the moment the party started.

Back in the front hallway she was just in time to see Arnie arrive, accompanied by another batch of hangers-on.

'Levitt!' Arnie exclaimed, hardly able to believe his luck.

'Arnie,' she replied coolly.

'Where's the man?'

'He's around.'

'Haven't seen you in the club lately. You've missed some radical nights.'

'I've been working.'

'You?' He chorled with laughter. 'Working? I don't believe it.'

'Fuck you, Arnie.'

Arnie turned to his friends. 'You see,' he said proudly, 'she loves me.'

Jordanna stalked away and headed upstairs. She was about to go to her own room when she changed her mind and decided to wait for Charlie in his bedroom. Eventually he'd stagger upstairs, and then she could talk to him about her test, maybe even read through some key scenes with him. That's if he wasn't too out of it.

She entered his large untidy bedroom. It was dark, but she could hear noises. 'Charlie?' she said, switching on the light.

His head was between Dahlia's legs, eating her pussy like he'd been on a starvation diet. He came up for air, completely unembarrassed at being caught. Dahlia lay there without moving, her face a study in stoicism.

'Oooops,' Charlie said, his half-crazed smile at full mast. 'I guess you caught me with my mouth in the cookie jar!'

She stared at the two of them. Her heart was beating very fast, but she managed to remain calm. 'Yes, I guess I did,' she said quietly.

'Wanna join in, kiddo?' he asked, raising an extravagant eyebrow.

She shook her head. 'No, thank you, Charlie.' And with that she turned the light off and left the room, closing the door behind her.

It was definitely time to move on.

Midnight Cowboy got a call at one a.m. He was asleep. 'Who's this?' he mumbled.

Jordanna. Remember me? I read with you at the casting session today.'

'Hey, yeah, Jordanna, what time is it? Hav
art?'

'Oh, like I'd be calling you at one a.m. to tell
got the part,' she said edgily. 'I gave you a goo
dation, can't do more than that.'

'So what's up?'

'Thought I'd drop by.'

'Now?'

'No, tomorrow morning.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah — come by now, it's cool.'

'Where do you live?'

'Venice.'

'Shit.'

'What?'

'You mean I've got to drive all the way to
'You don't gotta do anything.'

'OK, give me directions.'

Throwing a few things in an overnight bag she took off,
her Porsche zooming all the way down Wilshire to the beach.
She felt let down and hurt. OK, so she hadn't been foolish
enough to imagine Charlie was a long-term relationship, but
she also hadn't expected to find him in bed with his ex-
girlfriend while she was still living in the house. Men. They
always let her down. That's why she was better off with one-
night stands. Hit and run. Make out on *her* terms.

Rule number one — never stay around long enough to get
hurt.

Midnight Cowboy's tumbledown house was situated in a
rough neighbourhood near the boardwalk. She couldn't
decide where to hide her car, so she left it on the street
hoping it wouldn't get vandalized or stolen.

He greeted her in Levi's and nothing else. Great body.
Great sex. And he didn't mind using a rubber. At least she
made *that* concession to good behaviour.

In the morning her Porsche was still there, untouched by
human criminal. She drove back to Charlie's, took a shower
and changed clothes.

Mrs Willet was sipping tea in the kitchen. 'Are you moving out, dear?' she asked, quite cheerful for a change.

'Haven't made up my mind yet,' Jordanna replied, grabbing an apple from the fruit dish. 'Sorry to disappoint you.'

'I thought with Miss Dahlia and Sport moving back in . . .'

'That's a temporary arrangement.'

'No,' Mrs Willet was adamant. 'Mr Dollar assured me they'd be here on a permanent basis.'

'Well, good for Mr Dollar,' she said, biting into the apple as she walked over to the door. 'Tell you what, Mrs W, if I do decide to move, you'll be the last to know.'

The hatchet-faced housekeeper glared at her.

At the studio there was a message for her to report straight to Bobby's office. She lingered in the ladies' room first, studying her reflection in the mirror. She looked good. Bright-eyed. Too enthusiastic? No. When it came to scoring a role in a major movie there was no such thing as too enthusiastic.

Bobby Rush threw her off balance. He knew all her secrets, so to speak. He'd lived the same experience and come through unscathed. It was unnerving. *He* was unnerving. She couldn't quite get a beat on him, he seemed so together, and yet she – better than anyone – knew how difficult it must have been growing up with Jerry Rush as your father.

She also found Bobby undeniably attractive, even though he wasn't her type. Oh, no, not at all. She liked them young and hungry or old and successful. Bobby didn't fit into either category.

They were waiting for her when she entered the office. Bobby sat behind his desk, while Mac paced around the room. 'Take a seat,' Mac said. 'And for chrissakes relax.'

Easy enough for him to say. She was uncomfortable, excited, filled with trepidation. Oh, God, it was so unlike her to be nervous.

'So,' Mac said. 'Have you given our idea some thought?'

'Yes,' she said, trying to sound cool and in control. 'If you still want me to test, I'll do it.'

'Did you mention it to your father?' Mac asked, chewing on his thumbnail while watching her intently.

'Why would I do that?' she snapped.

'I thought —'

'Mac,' she interrupted heatedly. 'I don't even *live* there any more — why would I tell Jordan?'

Bobby got up, came around his desk and stood in front of her. 'Your mother was an actress, wasn't she?'

'Yes,' she said, beginning to feel really upright.

'So how come you never wanted to try it before?'

She decided to be honest. 'Because my father told me I have too much to live up to.'

He burst out laughing. 'That's *exactly* what I heard from my old man, and look at me today.'

Yeah, look at you. I saw *Style Wars*, she wanted to say, but she curbed her tongue for once. This was her chance to do something she'd always wanted, and she wasn't about to blow it.

'We'll test you today,' Mac said. 'Bobby'll test with you.'

'When?' she asked nervously.

'This afternoon.'

Her stomach churned. 'I can't do it that soon.'

'Why not?' Mac asked, quite reasonably.

'Because . . . because I need more time,' she stammered, unable to come up with a better excuse.

'Don't worry about a thing,' Bobby said, patting her on the shoulder in what she considered a patronizing fashion. 'You'll go over to wardrobe now, then we'll sit down for a couple of hours and read through the test scenes.' He fixed her with his incredibly intense blue eyes. 'Jordanna, trust me. It'll be OK.'

Sure, for him it would be OK, for her it would be a fucking nightmare.

She returned downstairs in a daze.

The good news was that she was going to test. The bad news was that now everybody knew who she was. Somehow word had leaked.

Florrie greeted her with a frown and a sharp, 'Why didn't you tell us who you were?'

'What was I supposed to do? Take out an announcement in the trades?' she fired back.

'No,' Florrie said, with a hurt expression. 'But you could have confided in *me*.'

Sure, confiding in Florrie would be like buying a full-page ad in *Variety*.

Jordanna noticed people were treating her differently. The kids around the office who'd once been so friendly and nice were now either distant or fawning all over her.

Nanette called her into the main casting office and gave her a vigorous pep talk. 'Listen, dear,' she said, squinting while dragging hungrily on her cigarette. 'You might be able to pull this off or maybe you won't. The camera loves some people, hates others. Nobody knows until you get in front of it.' She expelled a stream of lethal smoke into Jordanna's face. 'I'm sure you're aware they wanted Winona Ryder for the role.'

Oh, great, make me feel really secure.

Over in the wardrobe department a bossy woman in ill-fitting dungarees tried to talk her into wearing a short, low-cut dress for the test.

'No,' she said, going on instinct. 'My character wouldn't wear this, it's too cheap-looking.'

'I know what the character would wear better than you,' the wardrobe woman said, ready for a fight.

She refused to be swayed. 'I won't test in that dress,' she said, searching through several racks of clothes until she came across a simple white silk suit. 'Sienna doesn't flaunt her sexuality, she's more subtle,' she explained, holding the outfit up against herself. 'This'll be perfect.'

The wardrobe woman made a face and reluctantly agreed she could wear it.

Reading through the scenes with Bobby was painful. She wished she had a joint. She wished she was stoned. She wished she wasn't there.

Oh, Charlie, where are you when I need you?
Bobby was pleasant enough, but he got impatient if ...
didn't do things his way and that made her even more edgy.
As she got into the character she could feel the vibrations of
Sienna. I know this girl, she thought. I know her very well.
She's real fucked up. And if it wasn't for the fact that I'm a
survivor she could've been me.

'What are you thinking?' Bobby asked, placing his script
on a table.

'About the character and her hang-ups,' she said, hesitating
for a moment. 'I understand her psychology. Sienna's a little
crazy, like me.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'You're a little crazy, Jordanna?' he
said, teasing her.

'You know what I mean, Bobby. I'm sure your life hasn't
always been easy.'

Their eyes met, and for a brief moment there was a strong
connection.

'Right,' Bobby said, breaking the look as he picked up the
script again. 'Let's read the second scene one more time.'

The two scenes they'd chosen were quite different. One
took place at the beginning of the movie when Sienna was
posed to be naïve and innocent. The second scene hap-
pened near the end, when her madness finally manifested
self.

Jordanna enjoyed reading the second scene most, playing
psychotic was easy.

After they'd rehearsed for a while longer, Bobby got up
and said, 'That's it, you're on your own. Get yourself over to
hair and make-up and I'll see you on the set.' He took her
hand and squeezed it. 'Good luck.'

No flip reply came to mind. What was happening to her?
'Thanks,' she mumbled, 'I'll uh . . . I'll try my best.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



When Kennedy saw *Style Wars* she went into a fury. They'd taken her piece on Bobby Rush and totally reworked it — adding a whole load of material about his father and his hang-ups, all the stuff Mason had wanted. And her name was on the interview. *Her name!*

She called Mason in a white-hot rage. He blamed it on an over-zealous copy-editor. She told him exactly what he could do with his job. He pleaded with her to reconsider. She didn't know what to do, this had never happened to her before and she felt so betrayed.

Rosa came over and calmed her down. 'You need a good lawyer,' she advised. 'Stay with the magazine and get a legal document stating they can't change a word or you'll sue their ass. Why blow a good gig?'

Angry as she was, Kennedy agreed that was an excellent idea.

Rosa sat on the floor in the living room performing leg lifts. 'There's been another murder,' she said.

Kennedy snapped to attention. 'When?' she asked.

'A few nights ago — in Pasadena.'

'Who was the victim this time?'

'A woman — strangled in her apartment. She lived with her boyfriend, but he was out of town.' Rosa stretched her legs to the left. 'Here's the kicker. *Exactly* the same MO. She wasn't raped or robbed, and the killer left that death-to-the-traitors sign on her body. It's not public knowledge, but one

of our news guys is tight with the County Sheriff's Department and they got a report of the murder on the teletype. The sign matches the one left on the woman in West Hollywood.'

'What do the police say?'

'Nobody's releasing any statements.'

'That's three women strangled within a couple of months.'

'I know.'

'What did this one do?'

'She worked in a bank.'

'Hmm . . .' Kennedy said thoughtfully. 'Did you know the other two both worked on movies? Margarita was a make-up artist, and I found out that Stephanie Wolff was a script supervisor.'

'That could be coincidence. It's certainly not enough to connect them.'

'I know. But surely somebody should be investigating other than me?'

'You're right.'

'Who's in charge of this case, Rosa?'

'The problem is that all the murders took place in different counties, so there's several investigating officers. I'll see what I can find out.'

'Do that.'

The next morning she attempted to call Bobby Rush, anxious to apologize. It was no surprise when he failed to take her call. She sat down and wrote him a letter, explaining what had happened. At least it made her feel better.



Detective Carlyle was an overweight slob who ate doughnuts for breakfast, smoked cheap cigars and was saving up for a hair transplant. He'd been on the force too long to care about anything much, he had too many personal problems. First there was his wife – she wanted him to retire and go live in Montana. Secondly, there was his mistress – *she* wanted

him to divorce his wife and move in with her. Mostly Detective Carlyle was lucky to make it through the day.

When Kennedy Chase requested an interview he turned her down. Obviously the woman had connections, because an hour later his Captain called him in and informed him that he had to see her.

'What I gotta talk to a magazine writer for?' he grumbled.

'She's doing a story on that woman who got herself strangled. You'd better make sure our department comes out of this looking good.'

'OK, OK,' Detective Carlyle said, agreeing reluctantly.

When Kennedy strode into his office he got a shock, he wasn't expecting this classy looking blonde broad with the sensational body. He perked up considerably. 'What can I do for you, honey?' he asked with his best I'm-a-stud smile.

'You can stop calling me honey for a start,' she said briskly, sitting down in a chair on the other side of his desk and crossing impressive legs.

Another upright feminist. Whatever happened to the days when you could compliment a woman without getting a snotty put-down?

'What can I do for you, Miz?' he asked, heavy on the sarcasm.

She chose to ignore his attitude. 'I'm writing a piece on three women who've been strangled in LA over the past couple of months.'

'Yeah, yeah,' he said dismissively. 'The one in West Hollywood's the only one concerns me.'

'Why's that?'
'Cause she's the only one where the crime took place in my division.'

'But isn't there a feeling that the cases might be linked?'
'Where'd you hear that?' he asked cagily.

'It doesn't matter where I heard it.'
'It matters to me.'

'I'd like all the information you have.'

He cleared his throat, snotty broad - who did she think

she was? 'The only information I can give you is that we have no proof of anything as of now.'

'How can you say that?' she said forcefully, thinking to herself that this guy was verging on being a moron. 'The murderer left the death-to-the-traitors sign on the last two victims, there *has* to be a connection.'

Detective Carlyle shifted in his seat, he was dying to let loose a fart, but this uptight drill sergeant would probably complain. 'Rest assured we're investigating,' he said, fed up with being grilled.

She uncrossed her legs and rose to her feet. 'When you have something, I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a call.'

She handed him her card and left. As soon as she got home she reviewed her files. She'd interviewed several people who'd known the first victim, Margarita Lynda, and they'd all spoken highly of her. According to her neighbours she was a hard-working woman with plenty of friends.

She'd also found out that Margarita was divorced and had lived by herself with no current boyfriend. The ex-husband was not a suspect because he'd died in a car accident six months ago.

According to her best friend, Margarita used to enjoy going to Country and Western clubs every Saturday night. It was an interesting lead. Maybe Margarita had met someone there. A man who'd followed her home . . . A stalker who preyed on women living by themselves.

The second victim, Stephanie Wolff, was a different case. A lesbian, with a tight circle of friends, she'd lived with her elderly mother and her only interest had been her work.

The only thing the two women had in common was that they'd both worked in the movie industry.

Gerda Hemsley, the third victim, didn't seem to tie in. She'd been a banking officer.

Kennedy hadn't questioned anyone about Gerda yet, but she planned on doing so.

Later she called Rosa. 'How about going line dancing one night?'

Rosa hooted with laughter. 'Line dancing?'

'You'll love it,' she assured her.

'Are there men there?'

'Cowboys.'

'OK, count me in.'

'I knew I could.'

'By the way,' Rosa added, 'I keep on forgetting to tell you.'

'What?'

'I talked to Michael the other day.'

'Michael?'

'You *know*, that incredibly good-looking ex-detective I wanted to fix you up with?'

'Oh yes, another one of your fabulous blind dates.'

'The funny thing is he doesn't want to go out with you either.'

'Wow,' Kennedy said drily. 'I'm really heartbroken.'

Rosa laughed. 'Hmm . . . What can I tell you? You're probably perfect for each other.'

'Too bad we'll never find out.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ordanna had never had a feeling like it. Standing in front of a camera with a crew watching her every move, being the centre of attention, becoming another character. It was the most dizzying, amazing, awesome experience. She felt important — really important — for the first time in her life. Never mind that she'd grown up on film sets, been surrounded by movie stars at home, *this* was the real thing, *this* was magic.

Bobby seemed pleased with her performance, so did Mac. They did several takes on both scenes, and then all too soon it was over.

'What happens next?' she asked Mac as they strolled from the set.

He threw his arm around her shoulders. 'We'll see how you come across, and if it works we'll show the test to the studio guys who'll make the final decision.'

'What do *you* think?' she asked hopefully. 'Have I got a chance?'

'This is a new you,' he replied affectionately. 'You actually sound vulnerable.'

'Sure I am,' she replied seriously. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'Cause all I've ever seen is the other side of you. The tough biker chick image with hot and cold running guys.'

'I'm changing my life, Mac,' she said earnestly. 'I moved out of the pool house. I don't take money from Jordan any more. I'm finally getting it together.'

UR
'That's good to hear. You know, Jordanna, I've always had a special feeling for you.'

She tried flirting in a jokey way. 'Special enough to put me in the movie?'

Shaking his head he laughed. 'Hey, c'mon, you know it's not up to me.'

She left the studio in a daze, trying to be cool but filled with great expectations. God! What would everyone say if she got the part. Jordan, Charlie, her friends, a legion of Midnight Cowboys with tight butts and hungry eyes. Wow! It would really blow everyone's mind.

And if she did get it, her life would change. She'd have a career, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. She would be somebody in her own right, not merely Jordan Levitt's daughter.

It occurred to her that because she *was* his daughter they might not take her seriously.

No. Had to think positively. She had a fair chance. Look at Bridget Fonda, Laura Dern, Anjelica Houston. Plenty of Hollywood kids made it, you just had to be prepared to try harder to prove your own worth. And she was ready to do that. She was *really* ready.

☆ ☆ ☆

'Hey, kiddo.' Charlie was happily ensconced in front of his giant screen TV in the den while Sport played at his feet with a selection of toy soldiers. Dahlia was nowhere to be seen.

'Hi, Charlie,' she said evenly, wondering if he felt even the tiniest bit guilty about the previous evening.

He threw her a quizzical look. 'Mrs W tells me you didn't spend the night.'

'That's right.'

As if on cue Mrs Willet bustled into the room, picked up Sport and said, 'Time for this little man's dinner.'

'Good,' Charlie said, waiting until she was gone before returning his attention to Jordanna. 'Where were you asked, using the remote to click...'

'I had an appointment with sex.'

He chortled. 'You're pretty out there, kiddo.' A beat.

'Anyone I know?'

'Not your generation, Charlie.'

He scratched his head. 'A young one, huh?'

She wanted to hurt him as much as he'd hurt her. 'Tight butt, hard dick. I needed to jog my memory.'

He took another long beat before replying. 'Sorry if you've got an attack of the damaged feelings, but I never promised you fidelity.'

'I know.'

'So why are you upset?'

'Because . . . because . . .' Why *was* she upset? Could it be that she'd expected something from him that he wasn't capable of giving? Could it be that she *had* expected fidelity?

'Because I thought —'

'Yes?'

'That we had something special.'

'We do.'

'What?' she asked, genuinely puzzled.

'Friendship. I *like* you, Jordanna. Don't you like me?'

'Yes, Charlie.'

'Then drop it. Dahlia's back. She doesn't mind you being around. See if you can feel the same way about her.'

'I can't,' she said honestly.

'Too bad.'

'I'm moving out.'

'Where to?'

'I'll find a place.'

'Do you need money?'

She'd sooner work for Cheryl than take money from him.

'No, thank you, I'm fine.'

'Well, kiddo, you know you're welcome here any time. My door is always ajar — give it a kick and come back in whenever you want.'

She didn't know where to go, only that she had to get out. She couldn't go home to Daddy any more. Shep was

hardly likely to welcome her again. Cheryl was probably knee deep in girls. And Grant was wasted.

That left Marjory. Even though she was living at home, the Sanderson estate was bigger than a hotel, and Franklyn Sanderson spent most of his time on his private jet. Yes, Marjory seemed like a good idea, so she went upstairs and called her.

Marjory was happy to hear from her and insisted she came right over. She packed a couple of bags and left a note for Mrs Willer saying she'd send for the rest of her stuff.

One of these days she had to find a place of her own, this was getting ridiculous.

Maybe if she got the part in the movie . . .

Don't even think about it, she told herself sternly. Do not get your hopes up.

She left the house with no regrets. And once more it was a girl and her Porsche against the world.



Marjory seemed to be in a lively mood.

'How come you moved home again?' Jordanna asked, settling into one of the lavish guest suites.

'Daddy insisted,' Marjory replied, pulling at the hem of her pink cashmere sweater. 'Because of the letters.'

Jordanna frowned and began unpacking one of her bags. 'You're not still getting them?'

'Regularly.'

'Where do they come to?'

'He *was* sending them to my apartment,' Marjory said, fiddling with her long pale hair. 'But now they're coming here.'

Jordanna opened a bureau drawer and threw in some T-shirts. 'That's creepy,' she said. 'Like he's watching you.'

'I know,' Marjory agreed.

'What's your father doing about it?'

'He's hired a private detective.'

'You've got to be careful.'
'I am.'

For a moment Jordanna thought she might confide about the test. Then she changed her mind.
Wait and see, a little voice warned her. Don't go announcing something that might not happen.

Later she fell asleep missing Charlie, but knowing for sure she'd made the right move. Charlie was a talented man with a big heart, but when it came to relationships he was totally insensitive.

In the morning she reported for work as usual, hoping to hear something – anything – even if they didn't like her she'd sooner know than not.

Nobody said a word, she was stuck in the casting cubicle sorting through photos as if nothing had happened.

At the lunch break Florrie entered the room, perched on the side of her desk and came out with a half-hearted apology. 'I suppose it was smart of you to keep who you are a secret,' she said, chewing on a breath mint. 'Sorry I let it out.'

'It wasn't that I kept it a secret,' Jordanna explained carefully. 'I simply didn't advertise.'

'Why are you working?' Florrie demanded rudely, as if it was her right to know. 'You must have tons of money.'

'It's not *my* money, it's my father's.'

'Isn't that the same thing?'

Jordanna decided there was no point in carrying this conversation further. 'Uh, Florrie,' she said, attempting to sound nonchalant. 'What's happening upstairs?'

'Same old thing,' Florrie replied, obviously about as sensitive to the situation as a plank of wood. 'Actors in, actors out. Oh, and that girl from TV came in – Barbara Barr. The one from that big deal night-time soap. Y'know, she's always in the tabloids. Anyway, she read for Sienna.'

Jordanna felt her heart jump. 'Was she good?'

'They're putting her on video.'

Now her heart was pounding. 'Really?' she said, trying to sound as if it didn't matter.

'After lunch.'

'Did you hear anything about my test?'

'Nope,' Florrie replied, picking at her nail polish. 'But it doesn't matter, does it? It's not like you're a proper actress or anything. I expect they were getting desperate when they tested you. There's two more Siennas coming in this afternoon, and three videos of New York actresses.'

Jordanna managed to remain expressionless as Florrie rattled on. She didn't think the girl was being mean or even bitchy – merely thoughtless. Everyone thought that if you had a famous parent, it was enough, you didn't need anything else, certainly not a job. In a way she could understand Cheryl's delight at becoming a successful Hollywood madam. She'd made it in her own right, not because of Daddy and his studio.

'I'm not eating lunch today,' Florrie confided, removing her big butt from Jordanna's desk. 'I have to lose three pounds by Saturday. I've got a date with that cute guy over in promotion, the one with the new Acura Legend car.'

Three pounds won't cut it, Jordanna thought. Try fifteen.

Florrie wandered off. Jordanna sat still for a moment, considering her next move. Should she go and badger Mac, or sit tight and wait to see what happened next?

Sit tight. Stay cool. Do not get panicked.

But I am panicked. Totally. I want this part more than I've wanted anything in my entire life.

Chill out.

Fine.

Midnight Cowboy called the casting office in the afternoon. Her luck she answered the phone.

'Any news?' he asked, sounding as agitated as she felt.

For a second she thought he was asking about her, then she remembered she hadn't mentioned her test to him. 'Uh ... no. But if there is, the casting director will contact your agent.'

'Fuck!'

'What?'

'I hate this waiting to find out crap.'

'I know exactly what you mean.'

'Fuck!' he repeated, as if it were her fault. 'Can't you go in and ask?'

Nice of him to tell her what a wonderful time he'd had the night she'd driven over to his place and given him the best sex he'd probably ever experienced.

Nice of him to be so solicitous and charming and concerned.

If he knew she'd tested for Sienna he'd throw a fit!

She almost told him, but changed her mind. 'I gotta go,' she said. 'Work beckons.'

'Call me as soon as you hear?'
Don't hold your breath.

The rest of the day dragged. She caught a glimpse of Marcy Bolton, another young actress who arrived to read for Sienna, accompanied by her manager.

She's too short. Her face is pointed, like a ferret's. And she wearing too much make-up.

When Florrie emerged from the interview room on her way to the bathroom, Jordanna grabbed her. 'What was she like?' she demanded.

'What's who like?' Florrie replied vaguely.

'Marcy Bolton. Did she read? Was she good? How did she react?'

'Mac seemed enthusiastic.'

'And Bobby?'

'He was OK with her.'

Tell me she stunk, Florrie. Tell me they hated her!

'Has anyone else read for Sienna?'

'They're viewing the New York tapes now.'

Jordanna wished she could burst into the office and watch them, get an eye on the competition. 'How's your mouth?' she asked Florrie, hoping that maybe she'd have to go back to the dentist.

'It's all right,' Florrie replied, moving her tongue around her mouth. 'If ever you need a good dentist . . .'

No, Florrie, I do not need a good dentist. I need answers and I need them now!

Mac came down to see her at five thirty. She stared at him expectantly, waiting for the good news. He cleared his throat, looking everywhere except at her.

'So?' she said at last. 'What's the verdict?'

'Sorry,' he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. 'I fought for you, but the studio won't go for it. They say you don't have any experience – which unfortunately is true – but in my opinion we could have made it work.' He patted her on the shoulder. 'If it's any consolation you came across like dynamite.'

The disappointment that enveloped her was so overwhelming she could barely breathe. 'Who's got the part?' she managed to get out.

'Barbara Barr.'

She's totally wrong. Doesn't anybody realize that?

'Is . . . is Bobby happy?'

'Between you and me he's not ecstatic – after all, she's TV, but this is an important movie for him and he wants to please the studio. They've decided that since we can't get a star at this late date, it's prudent to go with Barbara. She has an enormous TV following and garners front-page publicity. They think it'll work.'

'Do you?'

'I wouldn't agree to cast her if I didn't.'

So that was it. Big opportunity out the window.

Normally something like this would have set her off on a self-destruct course. Drinks, drugs, Midnight Cowboys. But lately she'd been feeling more centred, and the never-ending cycle of trying to cure things with transient remedies had to stop.

I can handle it, she told herself. I can and I will.

She'd handled the Charlie situation when he'd screwed around on her. OK, so she'd run to the actor in Venice. Big deal. It had made *her* feel better, she hadn't gotten wasted and she *had* used protection. Score one for a change of direction.

The truth was she'd finally realized she was responsible for

her own life. No more brooding about Jordan and his series of wives, they were his business, not hers. At last it was becoming clear. No more punishing herself.

'So that's the end of my brilliant career,' she said ruefully. 'You're taking it well,' Mac replied, obviously relieved.

'I'm a big girl,' she said, full of false bravado, because she'd learned early on that the best way to survive was to hide your true feelings.

'And a smart one,' Mac said. 'Bobby's giving you a shot as his personal assistant. He'd like you to go up to his office.'

From movie star to PA in one minute flat. Quite a leap. 'Sure, Mac.'

'Oh, and, Jordanna?'

'Yes?'

'We're going to have fun making this movie, that's a promise.'

...iled wanly, still hiding her disappointment. 'OK,



'Good morning, Mr President.' The Man cleared his throat and tried again, lowering his voice to a macho growl. 'Good morning, Mr President.'

The Man stared at his naked reflection in the mirror and repeated the greeting twice more.

If circumstances were different he could have been the President of America. It was possible. The great American dream was always attainable. Look at some of the men who'd made it. Carter - a peanut farmer. Reagan, an actor. Kennedy - a womanizer.

Ahh, what it must have been like in the days of Kennedy, when the media were not snooping around every corner photographing every move. President Kennedy had gotten away with plenty.

The Man decided to add President Kennedy to the list of men he admired. Of course, the dead President would not knock Steven Seagal from the top spot, because Steven Seagal was a true hero. Unbeatable.

The Man continued to study his reflection in the mirror. 'Good morning, Mr President,' he said in a whispery female voice à la Marilyn Monroe. 'How ya doin', Mr President?'

It occurred to him there was a certain similarity between Monroe singing 'Happy Birthday, Mr President', to President Kennedy, and Barbra Streisand crooning one of her mournful love songs to President Clinton.

The truth was that all Presidents were whoremongers. He knew that. America knew that. It didn't seem to make any

difference. In some...
scored the most points.

I am very good-looking, The Man thought smugly. I am very handsome. I could have been a famous movie star if the breaks had been different.

A knock on his door startled him. How dare anybody disturb him. How dare they interrupt his precious solitude.

'Who's there?' he called out.

'Shelley.'

Shelley? He didn't know anybody called Shelley. In fact, he didn't know anybody at all. He was alone and that's the way he liked it.

'You must remember me,' Shelley said hopefully. 'I live in the house. We bump into each other sometimes. My mother sent me home-made fruit cake and I'd like to offer you a piece.'

'No,' he said abruptly.

'Please,' she wheedled. 'Yesterday was my birthday.'

He didn't wish to arouse her suspicions. 'I'll be out shortly,' he said gruffly.

'Come to my room - it's by the pool.'

He wondered if Shelley wanted him to fuck her. That's what most of them were after. Most of them except The Girl who'd led him on, and then, when he'd tried to consummate their relationship, she'd treated him like a stranger.

On reflection he was glad he'd killed her, even though he'd been forced to accept the harsh and unfair punishment.

AND THE TRAITORS SHALL DIE FOR GANGING UP AGAINST ME. EVERY ONE OF THE BITCHES AND THE WHORES.

He remembered meeting The Girl for the first time. So pretty and beguiling - it had not been difficult falling in love with her.

But she'd made one fatal mistake. She'd rejected him. She should never have done that.

He dressed quickly, unlocked his door, re-locked it behind him, and went looking for Shelley.

He found her in a large room overlooking the old tile swimming-pool.

Her door was open, but he did not enter immediately, he stood hesitantly on the threshold.

'At last,' she said, rushing to greet him. 'I thought I'd never see you here.'

He entered the room, hovering awkwardly in the middle of the floor.

'I can offer you herb tea, apple juice or wine,' she said.

'Nothing.'

'You know, John - you don't mind if I call you John, do you?'

John? And then he remembered he'd told her his name was John Seagal, which of course was a lie. 'No,' he said flatly.

'What do you do?' she asked curiously. 'I never see you around. You seem so . . . lonely.'

'I'm a writer,' he lied.

The news excited her. 'Oooh, do you write screenplays?'

He noticed that her hair was the same colour as The Girl's. Natural yellow, not dyed like most of the hussies in Hollywood.

'Books,' he said.

Now she was even more impressed. 'That's serious. What kind of books?'

'Vendettas.'

'Vendettas?'

'Revenge. If somebody does you wrong then you must see them get their come-uppance.'

'Oh, you mean like Death Wish. I love those movies where Charles Bronson walks around blowing the bad guys away. Don't you write a movie like that?'

'I told you - I don't write movies.'

'Shame, you could've written one for me, and when I'm a star you could've written all my movies. Then I could be famous.'

No, sorry, I only work on John Seagal films. He's my personal friend.' She hesitated a moment before adding, 'And, actually, you are, because I don't have any friends. I hardly know anybody.'

He found it hard to believe that a pretty girl like her would hardly know anybody.

It occurred to him that maybe he ~~was~~ had been talking to her another, and they'd arranged to put the girl in the house to try on him. Nothing they did would surprise him.

Thought for the day. If she was a girl like her, she would

How come you're here?' he asked.
'A friend borrowed the place from a girlfriend of hers, and she kind of passed it on to me.'
'You told me you didn't have any friends,' he said accusingly.
'She's just a girl I met at acting class.'
'You go to class?'

'Yes.'
He wished he could go to acting class, but it was impossible. Had to keep to himself. People were treacherous, and the less he mixed with them the better.

'I'm moving soon,' Shelley revealed. 'My acting teacher is going to Europe for three months and he's asked me to house-sit.'

'Where's that?' he asked, not really interested.
'Way up Laurel Canyon,' she said. 'It's a lovely small house, completely secluded. Perhaps you'll visit me.'

He nodded.

'Let me fetch you a piece of cake,' she said, moving across the room. 'I'm from Utah,' she called over her shoulder. 'Where are you from?'

There seemed no harm in telling her. New York.'

'You won't believe this,' she exclaimed, 'but I've never been to New York.'

She was wearing shorts and a skimpy T-shirt, and as she moved back towards him carrying a plate, he noticed her small breasts bouncing up and down beneath the thin material.

He'd not had a woman in a while. That initial fevered rush of whores when he'd first left jail had sated his sexual appetite, but now...

What if he decided he wanted to fuck Shelley? Would she allow him to? Or would she react the same way as the one with the yellow hair and start yelling and screaming and kicking until he'd been forced to put his hands around her soft white throat and squeeze tightly until he'd shut her up.

Shelley handed him a piece of fruit cake on a blue plastic plate. 'Taste that,' she said, licking her fingers. 'It's delicious.' She paused for a moment, then blurted out, 'Can we go to a movie one night?'

He considered her invitation. No,' he said.
'Why not?'

The late Gerda Hemsley's boyfriend was a big man with rugged features, crew-cut red hair and a worried expression. He was the manager of a sporting goods store. Kennedy arrived to see him at his place of work. He wasn't happy when she introduced herself and told him she was writing a story.

'I'm trying to put this behind me,' he said, agitatedly glancing around. 'Gerda was a fine woman. We lived together a year and then . . . this. Now everything's gone crazy. I had to move out of our apartment yesterday. I can't stay there without her.'

Kennedy made an instant evaluation and crossed him off as a suspect. She always trusted her immediate reaction when it came to people, and she sensed this was an ordinary guy caught up in a bad situation. 'Have the police questioned you?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said grimly. 'As if they had a right to. It isn't enough my girlfriend gets murdered, now *I* become a suspect.' He paused for a moment. 'You know what's happening in this country, don't you?'

'What?'

'It's the criminals that get treated right,' he said heatedly. 'The innocent people are the ones that end up with no justice.'

She nodded. 'I'm sure you're right.'

'I *know* I'm right,' he said forcefully.

A sales clerk came up with a request for him to sign off on a cheque. He did so.

Kennedy took out her notebook. 'Can I ask where you and Gerda first met?'

He frowned. 'Are *you* questioning me, too? Do *you* think I'm a suspect?'

'Of course not,' she said, realizing what a strain he must be under. 'I'm writing about several other women who've been murdered in the same way. Two of the women worked in the movie industry, Gerda in a bank. What did she do before that?'

'She was a bookkeeper at an accountant's office.'

'And prior to that?'

'Her mother knows. She can tell you.'

'Do you happen to have her number?'

He wrote the mother's number down on the back of a receipt and handed it to her.

'Thanks,' she said. 'I'll leave you alone for now, I can see you're busy.'

He nodded abruptly and walked over to the cash register.

She made her way to the front of the store and stood outside for a moment before crossing the parking lot.

He ran after her and caught her before she reached her car, startling her. 'Sorry,' he said, out of breath. 'But you must understand - this isn't easy for me.'

'I *do* understand,' she said sympathetically.

'Look,' he hesitated, having trouble talking. 'I'm glad you're trying to do something. You have no idea what it's like when somebody close to you is murdered.' He paused before continuing, choking back his emotions. 'If they ever catch the guy who did it, I'd like to personally hang him up by his balls.'

Kennedy nodded understandingly. 'If it was up to me I'd make sure you could.'

She called Gerda's mother from the car. An answering machine picked up, so she left her name and number and requested a return call. Then she set off to meet Rosa for lunch.

The restaurant was crowded and Rosa was excited, her brown eyes sparkling. 'Listen, Kennedy,' she said, 'I'm about to suggest something, and I insist you say yes because it's a *fantastic* idea.'

Oh, God, Rosa never quit. 'If it's a man—' she began. 'No,' Rosa said, interrupting quickly. 'It is *not* a man. It's business, pure business — OK?'

She sighed. 'All right, tell me about it.' Tapping her long scarlet fingernails on the table, Rosa said, 'The situation with these murdered women is getting out of control, and since the police are not exactly active, my news station has decided to adopt it as our story. We're all very excited. And I came up with a *brilliant* idea. *You're* going to appear on camera and talk about it on the evening news.'

Kennedy almost laughed aloud, Rosa had really lost it this time. 'Me? On television? You've *got* to be kidding. I don't even watch it, let alone appear on it!'

'I am *not* kidding. You'll do it,' Rosa said, eyes flashing. 'Why would I?'

'I'm telling you, there's a serial killer out there. It's time the police formed a task force, and we can make them. The power of TV is awesome. You'll see.'

'I'm sorry, there's no way I can do it.'

Rosa wasn't listening. 'Don't worry, you'll be great.' 'Says you.'

'My news director's joining us for coffee. If you haven't said yes by then he'll talk you into it. And no, Kennedy, do *not* get turned on — he is *not* available.'

She began to laugh. 'Finally, a man who's *not* available. And this is the one I'm going to want, right?'

Rosa laughed too. 'Yeah, right.'

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Kennedy was apprehensive, it was all happening so fast. She should have said no and listened to her gut instinct, but Rosa and her news director had been very persuasive.

She sat down and wrote an editorial, then she went over it with the news director, who was very enthusiastic.

Rosa advised her how to behave in front of the camera. 'It's easy. Sit still and get a fix straight into the camera. When the monitor rolls, you'll see your words come up on the teleprompter - all you have to do is read 'em. It'll look exactly like you're talking directly to the viewers.'

'Are you certain this is going to help?' she asked tentatively, not sure at all.

'Positive,' Rosa guaranteed.

'Then why don't *you* do it?'

'Because they're used to me. They see me on the news every night. You're a big-time journalist, our viewers will love it.'

'I *am*?'

'Yes, you *am*. Your *Style Wars* cover story on Bobby Rush is pretty controversial. *USA Today* did a piece about it. You're hot right now, and we'll use that factor to boost ratings.'

'I am not responsible for that story.'

'Think about it this way, you'll be doing some good. If we can get the Chief of Police to put together a task force, then we'll have done our job. Remember the Hillside Strangler a few years back? This is beginning to be just as bad.'

'OK, OK, I'll do my best.'

They did a mock run-through. What an ordeal! She stumbled and stuttered her way through it, feeling like a complete fool. Later she went into the make-up room where they proceeded to put too much blusher on her, and a deep green eye-shadow she hated. 'I can't stand all this make-up,' she complained.

'TV lighting washes people out, especially blondes,' Rosa explained. 'This way your features will come across.'

Next the hairdresser teased and sprayed her hair. 'Oh, God! I look like a Barbie doll,' she moaned, peering in the mirror.

'No, you do not. You look magnificent, stop having a fit.'

By the time she got back in front of the camera she was

The news team began taking their positions. Rosa and her co-anchor — a black man with crinkly hair and a deeply reassuring voice — sat in the middle of a curved desk, while the other regulars gathered around them.

Kennedy's mouth was so dry she didn't know whether she'd be able to say anything or not. Who *needed* this kind of stress!

Finally the cameras started to roll. She watched Rosa slip easily into her anchor role and felt slightly better. If Rosa could do it, so could she.

By the time the studio manager gave her the signal to start speaking she was like a greyhound at the starting gate — ready to win.

Taking a long deep breath she began to speak.

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'So,' Kennedy said, after the show, feeling quite elated. 'I've done my part, now it's your turn — we're going line dancing. Are you certain this is a good idea?' Rosa asked unsuspiciously as she left the studio.

Kennedy got behind the wheel of her Corvette. 'Whether you like it or not, we're doing it.'

'Maybe we should have brought Ferdie with us.'

'I don't have a feeling he'd stand out,' Kennedy said drily. 'In any case, I don't think these Country and Western dives are exactly crawling with six-foot-four black basketball players.'

Rosa agreed. 'I suppose he isn't exactly unobtrusive.' They drove to Boots, a Country and Western club on Pico Boulevard, pulled into the large parking lot, and got out of the car. Rosa immediately began worrying about her appearance. 'Is my ass too big for these jeans?' she said anxiously. 'I'm sure people are going to be pointing at me saying, "There's that anchorwoman with the big fat ass."'

'Oh yes, that's what they come here for — just to spot celebrities with big butts.'

'You'd be surprised. This is Hollywood, babe, celebrity spotting is what it's all about.'

'You've got it wrong – people come to these places to learn to dance. They're into this whole cowboy thing.'

'Bullshit,' Rosa replied succinctly. 'They come here to get picked up.'

'Margarita wasn't the type.'

'Every woman's the type if she's available.'

'I don't think so, take me as your prime example.'

'Oh, *you*. You're hardly normal.'

'Thanks a lot.'

The place was packed. Would-be cowboys abounded, circling the vast round bar that took up the entire centre of the huge space. There were a few booths against the wall, and several standing stations where you could place your drink and survey the action which took place on a large dance floor where groups of people indulged in two-stepping and line dancing. Good old country togetherness.

'Jeez!' Rosa exclaimed. 'Am *I* in the wrong place! This is Americana City. I bet I'm the only Hispanic here. I'll probably get beaten up in the parking lot!'

'Calm down,' Kennedy said. 'We'll have a drink, take a look around, then we're out of here.'

'I don't believe these guys,' Rosa exclaimed, checking out the passing parade of men. 'Look at 'em. Cowboys by night, accountants by day.'

'How do you know?'

'Hey, you think real cowboys would walk around like that with their ten-gallon hats and sassy attitude. Honey, I can assure you, they *ain't* real cowboys.'

'So now you're an expert on cowboys. I thought basketball players were your thing.'

'Do me a favour – buy me a beer and let's make this short.'

They approached the bar. 'Howdy, little ladies,' greeted the barman, confirming all their worst fears.

'I suppose a Martini's out of the question?' Rosa said, perching on a bar stool.

He chortled happily.

'Two beers,' Kennedy said.

LE 11
'This your first time?' the barman asked, with a gap-toothed leer.

'How *did* you guess?' Rosa drawled sarcastically.

'You can have a real blast if you leave your cares on the doorstep.'

Rosa's eyebrows shot up. 'You got that out of a fortune cookie at Trader Vic's, right?'

His face was blank. 'Trader who?'

'Forger it.'

'I suppose you get a lot of regulars here?' Kennedy asked, leaning her elbows on the bar.

'S' right,' he replied. 'Regular as clockwork. They come in, dance four or five hours, then go home happy. That's our motto at Boots – put a smile on your face and a spring in your step.'

'Oh, *please*,' murmured Rosa.

'Will you shut up,' Kennedy whispered. 'I'm trying to make contact here.'

'Make contact, my ass,' Rosa said. 'Oooh, there goes a nice one.' Her attention was taken by a blond hunk in a plaid shirt, jeans and a brown Stetson.

They made eye contact and he swooped. 'Care to take it to the floor, ma'am?' he asked politely.

'Why not?' she said, winking at Kennedy.

'Little lady's gonna fit right in,' the barman remarked as Rosa hit the floor with the hunk.

'My friend, Margarita, used to come here,' Kennedy said, showing him a picture. 'Do you remember her?'

'I know a lotta people, but names ain't my strong point.' He squinted at the photograph. 'Naw, don't recall her.'

'You might have read about her,' Kennedy continued. 'She was murdered a couple of months ago.'

'Was she murdered here?' he asked matter-of-factly. 'Here?'

'I'm not supposed to say this.' He leaned across the bar, speaking confidentially. 'We had a coupla rapes in the parking lot.'

'You did? When?'

'The last one was a few weeks ago. Course, they've beefed up security since then.'

'Margarita wasn't raped, she was strangled. It's possible she might have been followed home from here.'

'Really?' he said thoughtfully. 'You a relative?'

'No, I'm a writer,' she said, handing him her card. 'If you come up with anything, give me a call.'

He peered at her card. 'Kennedy. That's a funny name for a girl.'

'What's *your* name?'

'Brick.'

'Oh, that's much more sensible . . . for a boy.'

Before he could react she took her bottle of beer, moved away from the bar, and stood at the edge of the dance floor, where she watched Rosa making a complete fool of herself as she tried to two-step with the young stud who had his arms all over her. Trust Rosa to get right into the spirit of things.

'OK, folks! Time for a little line dancing!' the disc jockey announced through his microphone. 'We'll start you off with the Tumbleweed – follow that with a sexy dose of smooth Black Velvet – an' then we're divin' straight into the Achy Breaky.' A cheer went up.

Rosa's cowboy for the night escorted her off the floor. 'We're going over there to practise,' Rosa said, her cheeks flushed. 'Billy's teaching me to line dance.'

'Billy, are you a regular here?' Kennedy asked, stopping him before he whisked Rosa off.

'Yes, ma'am, come here all the time.'

She took out her photograph of Margarita. 'Do you know her?'

Tipping his Stetson back he stared at it for a moment. 'Can't say I do, ma'am.'

'She used to come here every week.'

'Reckon she hung out on different nights to me.'

'Reckon she did,' Kennedy replied.

'Maybe you should ask one of the bouncers. They know everythin' happens around here.'

'That's a good idea, thanks.'

She'd noticed several bouncers roaming around the place dressed in black cowboy hats, black shirts and the *de rigueur* tight blue jeans. She approached one standing by the door, a shiny silver sheriff's badge gleaming on his shirt.

'Do you remember this woman?' she asked, showing him the picture of Margarita.

He glanced at the photo. 'What do I get if I do?'

'What do you want?' she replied, going along for the ride.

This one was not shy. 'A date,' he said.

'I have a feeling my husband wouldn't appreciate it.'

'Aw, shit! All the best ones are taken.'

'Do you remember her?'

'Yeah, good-lookin' lady. She used to come here every Thursday night. Fancy little dancer.'

'Did she hang out with anybody in particular?'

'Nope. Sometimes she'd be with a couple of girlfriends, never saw her leave with a guy.'

'You've got an excellent memory.'

'It's a trick of the trade.'

She was surprised he didn't tag little lady on to the end of the sentence, he seemed to be the type. 'OK, thanks,' she said, brushing back her blonde hair.

'Too bad you're taken,' he said, winking suggestively.

It was obvious she was getting nowhere fast. She looked around for Rosa, and found her in the practice area now learning some kind of intricate two-step with the very attentive Billy. Oh, boy, if Ferdy could only see her now!

'We're going,' she said.

'We are?'

'Sorry to drag you away.'

Rosa waved at her new conquest. 'See ya, cowboy.'

He tipped his hat. 'See ya, pretty lady.'

'Stop baby-snatching,' Kennedy scolded. 'You've got one juvenile at home, isn't that enough?'

Rosa giggled. 'I may be taken but I'm not dead!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Mac Brooks couldn't sleep, something was on his mind and there was no way he could shake it. He watched *Nightline* for a while, until Sharleen complained that the glow from the television was bothering her.

'I need my sleep, honey,' she murmured, 'I'll have bags under my eyes in the morning if you keep this up.'

He switched off the television and lay flat on his back in the dark, his mind racing this way and that.

Something was horribly wrong, his past was coming back to haunt him and it wasn't a good thing.

When he'd heard about Margarita Lynda's murder he'd thought of it as random violence, one of the many perils of living in L.A. But recently he'd found out about Stephanie Wolff's demise, and he'd known, without a doubt, that their murders had to be linked. Then tonight, on the early news, they'd reported the brutal murder of actress Pamela March.

He'd gone cold inside. There was no doubt now, he *knew* who was committing the murders.

After dinner he'd gone to his study hoping for some peace and quiet so he could think things through and decide what action he might take.

Sharleen had followed him in, leaned over the back of his chair and began ruffling his hair. 'Let's go to a movie in Westwood,' she'd suggested. 'And if you're *veree, veree* good we can make out in the back row. How does that grab you?

'Not tonight, sweetheart.'

She was in a flirtatious mood. 'Why not, pussycat?' she'd asked, playing with the top of his ear. 'I promise you I'll make it worth your while.'

'Because I don't feel like it.'

'You're so boring when you're working,' she'd said, pouting.

'So are you,' he'd retaliated.

'I could've been in this movie,' she'd said petulantly. 'Bobby and I would've had sensational chemistry, and you know it. It's so silly you're jealous . . .'

'Sharleen, I've told you once, I am *not* jealous.'

'Yes, you are.'

'No. I'm *not*.'

'Oliver Stone wants to meet me.'

'Good. I hope he meets you, loves you and hires you. Several months in Vietnam will do you a power of good.'

'Not doing another Vietnam movie.'

'Whatever,' he'd said shortly, wishing she'd leave him

alone. As he was lying in bed unable to sleep with Sharleen beside him, breathing deeply, her eyes closed, her luscious lips slightly open.

How could he think about was the murdered women. How would it take before the police connected them?

How long before they realized that all three had worked *The Contract*?

He knew he had a responsibility to speak up, but if he did it would only drag the whole nightmare back into the headlines.

Seven years ago a murder had been committed on his movie. Ingrid Floris, a beautiful young actress, had been brutally killed by the actor portraying her ex-boyfriend. He'd dragged her from her trailer in front of several witnesses, and after a violent struggle, strangled her.

Margarita Lynda had run screaming for help, while Stephanie Wolff and Pamela March had hovered in the parking lot watching the entire incident - both of them

transfixed with horror. Jordanna Levitt, Cheryl Landers and Gerda Hemsley had seen everything from the window of the production trailer.

By the time Margarita had returned with a couple of burly drivers, it was too late to save Ingrid. She was already dead.

All six women were called as witnesses at the trial.

All six helped put the killer away.

The name of the actor was Zane Marion Ricca. He was the nephew of Mac's godfather, although nobody knew it – including Zane, who thought it was just pure luck that he'd gotten such a big break in an important Hollywood movie.

Mac knew better. Mac had done his godfather a favour, because when asked he was smart enough not to say no.

The truth was that nobody said no to Luca Carlotti.

Christ! Mac realized that Zane must be out of jail. And the horrifying reality was that it could be him systematically killing every one of the women who'd testified against him.

Everyone except Jordanna, Cheryl and Gerda.

Maybe they were next.

He sat bolt upright in bed, sweat beading his forehead.

'Wassamatter?' Sharleen mumbled sleepily, throwing her arm across him.

'Go back to sleep, baby,' he said, surprised to hear his voice so soothing and calm.

'Hmm . . .' She turned over and he noticed the voluptuous outline of her breasts through her silky nightgown. Too bad he wasn't in a better mood, although they rarely had sex in the bedroom – that was too normal for Sharleen.

He slid out of bed and went into his dressing room where he put on jogging pants, a sweatshirt, socks and Nikes. Then he went downstairs. There was no point in trying to sleep, this problem wasn't going away.

He hurried into his study shutting the door behind him. The blinds were open to the patio, so he pulled them down, then crossed the room and removed a small Picasso from the wall next to the fireplace. Behind the expensive painting, embedded securely in the wall, was a hidden safe.

He entered the combination and the steel door clicked open. This was his safe. Sharleen had her own. Only in California.

He paused for a long moment before divesting the safe of its contents. It wasn't often he took the bitter-sweet memory trip — some things were best left unremembered.

First he removed a large brown envelope containing several photographs. He opened the envelope, took out the photos and spread them across his desk.

Memories came flooding back. Mac Brooks aged three, balanced on the shoulders of his father, a tall, lanky man with curly brown hair and a carefree expression; Mac at six with his mother, Priscilla, a gorgeous blonde in shorts and a halter top; Mac at twelve — a dirty-faced villain with a crooked grin and larceny in his heart; and Mac at fifteen, standing next to his godfather, Luca Carlotti.

Mac stared intently at the photo. Luca Carlotti, a short man with deep-set hooded Valentino eyes, full lips and patent-leather slicked-back hair. He wore a cobra's smile and excellent tailoring.

Luca Carlotti had been the most feared man in the neighbourhood. He'd also been the most loved.

Luca Carlotti could make dreams come true or he could crush you underfoot. He was a powerful force and Mac's father was his right-hand man.

As Mac grew up he soon realized why the great Luca Carlotti was his godfather. It was because Luca was fucking his mother, and his father didn't have the balls to object.

Luca Carlotti and Mac's parents hung out, went everywhere together, until one night they were at an after-hours club in Harlem listening to a famous jazz singer. It was past two in the morning when they left. Mac's father exited the club first to signal their driver. As the sleek limousine pulled up, Luca and Priscilla emerged from the club.

A car cruised slowly by. Luca stopped, began to say something. At that exact moment a hail of bullets came at them. Luca dropped to the ground dragging Priscilla with

him, while Mac's father took a bullet straight through the heart – a bullet meant for Luca. Mac was sixteen at the time.

Luca was not an ungrateful man. From that day on he was actively involved in seeing that Mac got everything he wanted.

He wanted to be a boxer.

Luca paid for a trainer and arranged a series of amateur fights.

He wanted a car.

Luca bought him a red Mustang.

He wanted to be a film director.

Luca fixed it so he could go to film school.

He wanted to be employed on an actual movie.

Luca arranged for him to work as third assistant on *New York Nights*, a film some of his 'friends' had invested money in.

The experience thrilled Mac. He knew he had found his true vocation.

The director of *New York Nights* was William Davidoss, a forceful man with a loud voice and flamboyant style. His daughter, Willa, was the key to Mac's golden future.

Shortly after the movie wrapped, he and Willa ran off to Las Vegas and got married. Within three years he was directing his first movie.

Luca Carlotti and his mother had wished him luck when he'd moved to Hollywood. They'd respected his decision to distance himself from his New York connections. Luca understood things like that, he was a very understanding man.

It wasn't until years later, when Mac was prepping *The Contract*, that Luca had phoned him. 'I need a favour, son,' he'd said, as if they'd spoken yesterday.

Mac hated it when Luca called him son. Even though Luca was still in bed with his mother, it didn't give him the right to call him son.

'Whatever you need, Luca,' he'd replied smoothly, because it suited him to stay on his godfather's good side.

'I got me this nephew wants t'be an actor,' Luca said. 'Not a bad-lookin' kid — give him a part in one of your movies. I promised my sister I'd do this.'

'It can't be a starring role,' Mac said curtly.

'A coupla scenes, that's all I ask.'

'It's done.'

Mac remembered their conversation well. And then he remembered Zane Marion Ricca.



From the moment Mac set eyes on Zane Marion Ricca he got bad vibes. Zane had an attitude problem — he thought that just because he'd been cast in a major movie he was a star and behaved accordingly.

Mac did not appreciate such behaviour on his set, he expected everyone to respect each other and get along, but with Zane around it was not to be.

Because of his promise to Luca, Mac was stuck with the little . . . He'd interviewed him briefly, had him read for the small but al part of the ex-boyfriend, and hired him, much to the ist of his casting director, Nanette Lipsky. He has no experience,' Nanette complained. 'Why, Mac? 're usually so particular.'

'Because he's got a look,' Mac replied stubbornly. 'It'll work for character.'

Zane did have a look. Flat grey eyes narrowed like slits in a le thin face. A blank expression. Black hair, slicked back like his ncle.

Zane wasn't handsome, he wasn't ugly, he was merely . . . nothing.

His nothingness would enhance the role. Mac felt he could live with it.

He was wrong. Zane was the worst pain in the ass he'd ever come across. He hit the set like he thought he was as famous as Tom Cruise. He insulted the make-up person straight off. Margarita ran to Mac in tears, complaining bitterly. Then Zane proceeded to alienate everyone else connected with the movie.

Mac felt helpless. What could he do? If it was any other actor he would have fired him. But he'd promised Luca this favour and he felt duty-bound to deliver.

Ingrid Floris was an incandescent beauty. Young and innocent, with a pure virginal grace, Mac felt sure she had a big career in front of her. He'd given her a small part in his previous movie and now she had a larger role in *The Contract*. She did not disappoint him; her performance was just right. She had a special quality, similar to a young Grace Kelly.

Mac was so impressed that he didn't even try to hit on her as was his habit. It would have been difficult, because at the time he was still married to Willa, and he was also sleeping with Jordanna, who at seventeen was a wild thing. He felt guilty about sleeping with Jordanna for about five minutes. But she was so determined – if she wanted something she went for it. And she wanted him, it was hardly like he chased her.

He lived in fear that her father – a friend of his – would find out and kill him. But Jordanna merely laughed when he expressed his thoughts.

'Jordan couldn't care less what I do,' she said lightly. 'He's too busy getting married again ... and again ... and again!'

'You're going to be a very exciting woman one of these days,' he told her.

She grinned. 'What am I now, a dog?'

'Yeah, that's exactly what you are – a cute little mutt.'

Their affair lasted exactly six weeks. After that she got bored and turned her attention to one of the extras who rode a Harley and surfed. Mac was relieved, her energy was sapping every ounce of his.

Ingrid had almost completed her role in the movie when she started to work with Zane. Her disposition was as sweet as her looks, she was such a pleasure to be around that even Zane began to behave himself.

This was good, because by this time everyone on the set couldn't stand the sight of him.

The scenes between Ingrid and Zane were quite powerful. Zane might be jerk of the year, but it worked for him.

playing, because that's what her ex-boyfriend in the movie was supposed to be, a total jerk-off.

Mac had no idea that off the set Zane was coming on to Ingrid - propositioning her, inviting her out, bombarding her with gifts and flowers. His attention was unwelcome, Ingrid had a boyfriend. She told Zane, who refused to accept it, continuing to pursue her full force.

On the day they were due to shoot the rape scene, Ingrid was extremely nervous. She confided in Margarita while sitting in the make-up chair.

'Do you want me to talk to Mac?' Margarita asked. 'I will if it'll make you feel more secure.'

Ingrid shook her head. 'I'm sure Zane doesn't mean any harm ... he's confused, it's almost as if he thinks I am the character I'm playing, and he is my ex-boyfriend. It's weird, but I suppose it works for him.'

'Don't worry, we'll all be on the set watching out for you.'

Rape scenes were hard to shoot at the best of times, but with Zane the experience was tougher than usual. He was taking all his frustrations out on Ingrid, treating her roughly in rehearsal, in spite of Mac's warnings to lay back.

When it came time for the first take Zane really let rip.

'Cut,' Mac yelled.

Zane was on top of Ingrid, shoving his mouth down on hers, at her clothes.

'Fucking CUT!' Mac screamed when Zane failed to stop. Still he kept going.

'Crazy bastard,' Mac shouted, running forward and personally hauling Zane off Ingrid, who was genuinely petrified. 'You dumb motherfucker!' Mac bellowed. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

Zane's eyes were flat and cold. 'I'm acting,' he said. 'Isn't that what you wanted?'

'When I call cut, you goddamn jump. This is my film, my set, and you go by my rules. Now get the fuck outta my sight.' He bent to assist Ingrid to her feet. 'You OK, sweetheart?'

She nodded, attempting a weak smile. 'It'll work for the scene, won't it?' she asked hopefully.

'You bet,' Mac said. 'Print it!' he called out. 'I'm not putting you through that again.'

Later that day Zane went to Ingrid's trailer. She thought he had come to apologize and let him in. They began to verbally fight – even Ingrid had a limit as to how far she would allow herself to be pushed. When Zane tried to force himself upon her – claiming she'd been leading him on – their fight turned physical and they burst out of her trailer in full combat.

It all happened so fast.

One moment they were struggling, and the next Ingrid lay dead on the ground.

A young promising career was over, and Mac felt completely and utterly responsible.



'Honey, what are you doing?' Sharleen stood in the doorway of his study wrapped in a pale peach peignoir, the outline of her full breasts disturbingly visible.

'Sharleen,' he said patiently. 'Go back to bed, it's three in the morning.'

'I know,' she said, shivering as she entered the room. 'That's exactly my point.'

'I'm studying the script,' he said.

'No you're not.'

'Yes, I am.'

'Come to bed,' she said temptingly. 'I'm lonely.'

'Don't do this to me, honey. I need time by myself.'

She spied the photographs, and before he could stop her she reached across his desk and picked one of them up. It was just his luck it was the one of him at fifteen standing next to Luca Carlotti.

'Who's this?' she asked curiously. 'Not your father?'

'No, that's not my dad.'

'Well, who is it?'

'A friend of the family.'

Sharleen gazed at the picture. 'He looks very ... gangsterish.'

Mac laughed uneasily, casually moving around his desk and plucking the photo from her grasp. 'Gangsterish! What kind of word is *that*?'
She grabbed for the photo. 'Let me see again. How come—'

He held her wrists lightly and shut her up by pressing his lips firmly down on hers.

Sharleen responded immediately. After all, they weren't in the bedroom, why wouldn't she?

Peeling off her peignoir he bent her back against the edge of his desk and roughly lifted the skirt of her nightgown. 'Sweetheart,' she murmured huskily. 'The kids . . . they might come in.'

'Everyone's asleep,' he assured her, touching the tangle of hair between her legs. 'Besides, I thought you got off on a little danger.'

As he said danger he thrust himself inside her. She was not quite ready, which added to the excitement.

'Mac—'

He reached for her breasts, covering them with his hands as he began to make love to her.

She threw her head back and sighed deeply.

Soon they were in perfect sync.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Working with Quincy was about to keep Michael very busy indeed. Apart from the Marjory Sanderson case there were several other things Quincy was into, such as trailing an errant husband on behalf of a jealous wife, and damage control on a drugged-out female TV star.

'Our job is to keep her outta the papers,' Quincy said. 'So every time this girl goes out, gets stoned, hits somebody, or creates a riot in a club, we gotta pay people off an' make sure it doesn't headline the scandal rags.'

'Sounds like a full-time job,' Michael said, swigging non-alcoholic beer from the bottle.

'She has a bodyguard with her at all times. He reports to me every morning. If there's any damage control I take care of it, an' get paid plenty for doing so.'

'Who picks up the tab on this one?'

'Orpheus Studios. She works for their TV production company. Orpheus picks up the tab on a lot of things, you'd be surprised.'

They were sitting in front of the television in Quincy's house half watching a ball game. Amber had cooked them a fried chicken and mashed potato dinner, and then gone up to bed as she, Quincy and the kids were leaving on a weekend skiing trip to Big Bear early the next morning. Michael had volunteered to house-sit.

'Remember Rosa, that TV reporter?' he said, settling back on the couch. 'I met with her the other day and she handed

me a sackload of letters. I've been reading through them. Mostly they're from women.'

Quincy's eyes didn't leave the television. 'Yeah? What do they say?'

Michael shrugged and shook a cigarette loose from a pack of Camels. 'Y'know the kind of thing,' he said, slightly embarrassed. 'They wanna marry me, take care of me, have my babies.'

Quincy chuckled loudly. 'You mean they want to jump your bones, right?'

'Very funny,' Michael said, lighting up his cigarette.

'But true, huh?'

'There were a couple of interesting letters that might be worth following through.'

'What makes you think so?'

'I know it's probably crap, but I gotta do something. The cops have come up with exactly nothing - I call 'em every day.' Reaching into his jacket pocket he pulled out two letters and handed them over. 'Here, take a look.'

The first letter was written on scented notepaper with raised flowers printed around the top. Quincy scanned it quickly.

Dear Mr Scorsini,

I watched you on TV. I can be of great help to you. To make contact, take an ad in the personals of 213, the weekly Beverly Hills magazine. Be prepared to pay ten thousand dollars cash for information.

It will be worth it to find your child.

A friend.

'What do you make of it?' Michael asked.

'Someone trying to scam you for money.'

'You think?' Michael said, expelling a stream of smoke.

'Yeah, I think,' Quincy said, shifting on the couch. 'Jeez, Mike, if Amber saw you smokin' in here she'd have a freakin' fit.'

'One more drag and it's history.'

'I should hope so. What's the other letter say?'

'Read it.'

Quincy opened the scrawled note which he found with no signature.

*Heron Jones is in Las Vegas
He knows where your baby is*

'What you gonna do?' Quincy asked, looking down. 'Go running to Vegas to see him?'

'Rosa Alvarez has asked me to do something. Maybe I'll do that and see what happens.'

'The more you're on television the better it is. You know what they say in Hollywood - that's the thing as bad publicity.'

'Jesus Christ, Q, I never thought I'd hear you use Hollywood expressions.'

'You gotta go with the flow when you're here, Jerk.'

Quincy grinned. 'Thanks.' He got up from the table, walked into the kitchen, and helped himself to another Heineken. 'You've got the number what was it the weekend, right?' he said, strolling back into the living room.

'Yeah, yeah.'

'And if there's any emergency -'

'I'll call.'

'You should've come with us, because you gotta see the and brood.'

'You make it sound like I'm doing the the the I'm on with anything until I find Bella.'

'I understand. Look, if Marjory ~~something~~ the you can handle her?'

'C'mon, Q.'

'Y'know, I don't get it, the guy ~~something~~ to see her. There's no pay-off for him. The man was a random - all mailed from ~~different~~ ~~countries~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~world~~ ~~and~~ ~~he~~ ~~is~~ ~~keep~~ ~~an~~ ~~eye~~ ~~on~~ ~~the~~ ~~situation~~ ~~and~~ ~~move~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~city~~ ~~is~~ ~~kind~~ ~~of~~ ~~neurotic~~.'

'I noticed.'

That's it, I think. Oh, yeah, I had a call from my connection at Orpheus Studios asking me to meet with Mac Brooks, the director.'

'What does he want?'

'Don't know until we see him. We'll visit the set first thing Monday.'

'You mean I get to watch a real live movie being shot?'

'Exciting, ain't it?'

They looked at each other and broke up. In the morning Quincy, Amber and the kids left early. Michael rolled out of bed and decided to call his mother. He'd spoken to her twice since Rita's murder. Naturally he'd told her about Bella's disappearance, but she hadn't bothered to phone him back to check on developments or see how he was holding up. Big surprise.

She answered on the first ring, which was a relief because it meant he didn't have to speak to Eddie.

'Hey, Ma, how's it going?' he asked, falsely cheerful.

'The same, Mikey,' she said with a weary sigh. 'Always the same.'

'That's good.'

'You're not coming back, are you?'

'No, Ma. Can't do it. Gotta stay here 'til I find Bella.'

'That's right, you gotta stay there,' his mother repeated, not sounding too concerned.

'How are you?' he asked. 'Eddie keeping his hands to himself?'

'Eddie's all right, Mikey. He works hard. You always talk bad about him, but he's only doin' what he has to do. It gets him through the day.'

Gets him through the day, my ass, Michael thought sourly. 'He's an old man now, Mikey,' Virginia added, her voice quavering. 'An' I'm an old woman.'

'No, you're not, Ma.'

'I get heart flutters, and my blood pressure's shooting way up.'

'C'mon, you'll outlive us all.'

'Don't want to,' she said sourly. 'I've had enough.'

'Do you need money, Ma?' Not that he had any, but as long as he could make his rent he was happy with her what was left.

She cheered up considerably. 'If you got some, Mikey, I havta take pills now, they cost plenty. We could use some help.'

How come she needed money when he'd heard from one of his friends in the neighbourhood that his brother had come into plenty of bucks? Apparently Sal was now involved in small-time racketeering and drove around in a flashy gold Cadillac with his wife of eighteen months, Pandi, a hard-faced bottle blonde who ran an escort service. He'd also bought a house - things must be going well. The last time Michael had seen Sal was at his wedding to Pandi, and they'd gotten into a big fight over Rita.

'Rita's the fuckin' best, how come ya treat her so bad?' Sal had demanded, like it was any of his business.

'Don't lecture me on how I should treat my wife,' he'd replied, stifling a murderous urge to smash Sal in his big fat face.

'You wouldn't know how t' handle a woman if ya tripped over her in a dark place,' Sal had sneered. 'Rita's a fuckin' queen, an' you're lettin' her go. Don'tcha have no sense?'

'Rita's moving to California because she wants to. We're getting a divorce.'

'Y'know whatcha are, Mikey?' Sal had taunted. 'You're a dumb fuckin' cop, an' that's all you'll ever be.'

They'd almost gotten into a fight, but Eddie had stepped in, placing his heavy bulk between them, telling them they were killing their poor mother. Never mind the Eddie was the one who beat the crap out of her when he thought he could get away with it.

Sal's words had infuriated him. They'd brought back a bad memory of his childhood. Eddie whacking him, screaming in his ear. 'Ya nothin', Mikey, ya take after ya old man an' he was nothin'. Two fuckin' split peas.'

Every day he was told he was nothin'. From that day on

recalled Rita at her best, when they were first together. She'd been so fun-loving and full of life, now she was just another crime statistic. A pretty girl chasing a big career who'd ended up on a slab in the morgue.

He slept fitfully, first dreaming about Rita and Bella, then waking early and lying in bed thinking about the two letters he'd shown Quincy, and wondering if he should do anything about them. If Heron Jones was in Vegas how would he find him? It shouldn't be too difficult tracking Heron if he was still performing.

He decided that maybe he'd hop on a plane next weekend, take a little trip. It was worth following every lead.

In the morning he got up late, cooked himself bacon and eggs; and enjoyed the luxury of watching ball games uninterrupted all day long.

At seven thirty he sent out for pizza, then settled back on the living-room couch to watch the first tape of *The Godfather*. Amber had bought Quincy the trilogy for his last birthday and if he was lucky he'd get to watch all three *Godfather* movies. What a treat! Al Pacino, James Caan, Marlon Brando, Robert Duvall – each actor better than the next.

He was mesmerized, so much so that he almost didn't hear the phone. He grabbed it just in time. 'Yeah?'

A whispery female voice. 'May I speak to Quincy, please.'
'Who's this?'

'Marjory Sanderson.'

'Hey, Marjory – ' He pressed the pause button on the remote. 'This is Michael Scorsini – Quincy's partner. He had to leave town this weekend, but he told me if you need anything at all to let you know I'm here for you. What's up?'

'I . . . I don't feel . . . safe,' she said hesitantly.

He sat up straighter. 'What do you mean? Did something happen?'

'No, I'm at the house and the guards are here and the dogs and everything . . . but I have this bad feeling.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Can you come over?'

He stalled for a moment, the last thing he felt like doing was driving over the hill into Bel Air. 'Uh . . . sure, Marjory, if it'll help you out.'

'Please.'

'OK, I'll be there soon as I can.'

Goddamn it! Just when the tape was getting to the best scene in the movie – the hospital set-up where Al Pacino has to guard Marlon Brando all by himself.

He thought about calling Quincy, but decided against disturbing the family on their weekend vacation, he was quite capable of calming Marjory.

He had on jeans and a workshirt, but why change? After all, it was Saturday night – what did she expect, a suit?

Too bad if she did. He turned off the TV and set off. The guards at the gate waved him through when he arrived at the estate. He wasn't sure if they'd been apprised of the situation or not, so he didn't bother stopping to discuss it, he drove straight up to the main house, parking outside the massive solid oak front door.

The butler let him in and led him into the fancy living room, where he took a seat and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited.

Thirty-five minutes later Marjory made her entrance. 'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I was on the phone to my father.'

Michael was not used to dealing with Hollywood. He was pissed and it showed. 'Yeah, well, you don't even have a magazine in this room – or a television,' he said curtly. 'I don't appreciate waiting around with nothing to do.'

She fluttered around the room. Was it his imagination or was she naked under her sheer white dress? He could make out the outline of her erect dark nipples, not to mention the faint shadow of her bush.

'How about a drink, Mr Scorsini,' she offered, her thin face flushed.

'Call me Michael,' he said, averting his eyes from the obvious show she was putting on.

'Very well . . . Michael,' she said, her voice almost a whisper. 'Can I fix you something?'

'Uh . . . I don't drink.'

'What a coincidence, neither do I.'

She was seriously pissing him off. He'd driven over here because she'd sounded upset and panicked, and now she was calmly offering him a drink like nothing was going on. 'This isn't a social call, Marjory,' he said tightly. 'I came here because you asked me to. You said you were upset. How about telling me what happened?'

She lowered her eyes. 'He phoned.'

'Is this the first time?'

'Yes. He's never called before.'

'What did he say?'

'The same things he wrote in the letters. That he's going to kill me . . .' She trailed off, too upset to continue.

'What did his voice sound like? Was it muffled? Young or old?'

'It was . . . muffled.'

'So you couldn't figure out his age?'

'Maybe . . . maybe in his thirties.'

'That's good, Marjory. That's a start. Black, white, Hispanic?'

'American.'

'So after you hung up, you called your father – is that it?'

'I . . . I contacted you. Then my father phoned to see if I was all right.'

'Why, did he know about the call?'

'No, he phones most evenings. I told him you were on your way over. He was pleased.'

'OK, Marjory, this is the next move. I'm going to put a machine on your phone line. It'll tape all your conversations so the next time he calls we'll be able to tape him – hear what he sounds like, maybe even trace the call.'

'My private conversations?'

'I'll show you how to activate the tape. If it's private you can turn the machine off.'

'I understand.'

'I'll set it up tomorrow when I can get the equipment. In the meantime, you got a friend who can spend the night?'

'My girlfriend is staying here now.'

'That's good. Where is she?'

'Working on a movie. She won't be back until later.'

'Any idea what time?'

Marjory shook her head.

'Is she an actress?'

'No. She's Bobby Rush's set assistant.'

'Sounds like fun.'

'It does?'

'Yeah, anything to do with the movies must be fun.' He wondered if he could light up a cigarette in this mausoleum.

'Do you work, Marjory?'

'I help out on charity committees. It's very time-consuming.'

'I bet,' he said, not believing her. As far as he could tell this girl was in desperate need of a life. 'OK,' he said briskly, ready to make a move. 'You got the guards, you got me on the phone if you need me, you got that butler guy - he lives here, right?'

'Not in the main house, he has an apartment in the servants' building.'

'How about if he moves into the main house for the night?'

'I wouldn't feel secure,' she said anxiously. 'I'd sooner you stayed.'

This was a new one. 'You want *me* to stay?' he asked, genuinely surprised and not thrilled.

'Yes, Quincy said if I needed him to spend the night it would be OK.'

Fine for Quincy to say that, he'd pissed off on a skiing trip. 'He did, huh?'

'Yes.'

'Uh, y'know, Marjory, I didn't come prepared.'

'All our guest rooms are fully stocked with anything you might need. You can sleep in the room next to mine.'

'It's kinda inconvenient.'

She fixed him with accusing pale-blue eyes. 'He threatened to kill me. I can't stay here alone.'

Michael sighed, there was no backing out of this one. 'Yeah, that'll do it every time,' he said wryly, rubbing his stubbled chin. 'OK, Marjory, if it'll make you sleep easier I guess I can stay.'

She looked suitably grateful. 'Thank you.'

'Don't mention it.'

'Have you eaten?'

'I had a pizza. When you called I was watching *The Godfather* on tape – that's some movie.'

'My father has a complete library of films. I'm sure we have it here if you'd like to continue watching it.'

'That wouldn't be a bad idea.'

'I'll watch it with you.'

Not exactly what he had in mind, but he could hardly say no.

'Come,' she said. 'Let me show you the library.'

He followed her down a vast hallway into an enormous wood-panelled library. On one side of the room were floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with probably every movie ever made stacked neatly side by side.

'Now, let's see,' she said. 'It will either be under "G" for *Godfather*, or sometimes he has them filed under directors. Was it Scorsese?'

'Nope.'

'I know,' she said triumphantly. 'Francis Ford Coppola.'

'Very good.'

She started searching through the tapes and finally found it. 'We could watch it in the screening room. It's set up for video.'

He shrugged. 'Suits me.'

'And then I can have the guards send out for pizza.'

'I didn't say I *wanted* pizza, what I said was I'd already had some.'

'Whatever you like . . . Michael.'

He had an uneasy feeling. There was something in the air he didn't like. Was she coming on to him? Please, please, don't let it be so. But Michael had an antenna for these things.

How was he going to explain this one to Quincy?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

☆

Watching Bobby Rush in action was quite an experience. Jordanna really got off on his dynamic energy, he never stopped. Not only was he the star of *Thriller Eyes*, but he was also the executive producer, so if he wasn't in the shot, he was busy looking over Mac's shoulder or conferring with either Gary or Tyrone about budgets and schedules.

Strangely enough, Jordanna found working for him to be an invigorating experience. She had not expected it to be so. He was extremely fast, and the real challenge was anticipating his needs before he asked. Not that she planned on making her life's work gofer to a movie star, but it was interesting, and as Charlie had said, being on the inside track and watching everything up close was an education.

When she'd worked on *The Contract* she was a kid of seventeen who'd only been hired because of her father's influence, so there hadn't been much for her to do. This time she was next to Bobby at all times, and felt very much a part of the great movie-making experience. Mac was right, it was fun.

Bobby was friendly but kept his distance. She did the same. She didn't want him to think of her as Jordan Levitt's daughter. She wanted to prove herself and show him that she could be there for him, giving him the kind of support needed.

His secretary visited the set every day, so did his public

Jordanna couldn't help noticing how both women fussed around him. It aggravated her – the way they hung on to his every word as if they didn't have anything better to do. So he was Bobby Rush, movie star. Big fucking deal.

Three days into the shoot he said to her, 'You know, Jordanna, I'm kind of surprised.'

'Why's that, Bobby?'

'Cause I figured I'd have to fire you after one day.'

'Thanks a lot!'

'Hey, this is a demanding job. But I gotta tell you, you're doing real good.'

'Is that a compliment?'

He smiled lazily. 'I guess so.'

He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, and a sensational body. Not a Midnight Cowboy body, but a great one all the same.

The one area Jordanna had always had complete confidence in were her relationships with men. Sex was easy. She'd known from an early age she could have anybody she wanted.

Bobby was different. Whenever she thought of him in a sexual way she got a strange shy feeling. This so confused her that she couldn't even bring herself to flirt. It was ridiculous. And yet . . . why did she find herself thinking about him all the time?

Well, of course, I think about him. I'm working for him. I'm with him seventeen hours a day. Why wouldn't I think about him?

Could this be love?

No way.

Neither Mac nor Bobby ate with the crew. They took their meals in their respective trailers, sometimes together so they could get into one of their heated discussions.

Bobby was a vegetarian, although he sometimes ate chicken.

'Don't you ever feel like a great big juicy steak?' she asked him.

'No.'

She rolled her eyes. 'I couldn't go without it.'

'I'll take you to a slaughterhouse one day — that might change your mind.'

'Oh, come on, Bobby, you wear leather shoes, don't you? And jackets and gloves?'

'But I don't eat it — there's a big difference.'

Usually she had the caterer prepare him a plate of vegetables or pasta, but Saturday night he decided to have dinner with the cast and crew. He strolled over to the catering truck, getting into line behind a couple of the grips. She stood next to him.

'How's Charlie?' he asked.

'Charlie?' she answered blankly.

'Charlie Dollar.'

'Oh, Charlie . . . um, I'm sure he's fine. I haven't seen him for a while.'

'You haven't?'

'We were hanging out on a temporary basis.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really.'

'Hmm . . .'

'What does *that* mean?'

'I got the impression —'

'That we were fucking?' she said boldly, wanting to shock him. 'Yes, that's right, we were, until he moved his ex-girlfriend back in. Satisfied, Bobby? Is that what you wanted to know?'

He began to laugh, which infuriated her. 'Slow down,' he said, still laughing. 'I'm not *The Enquirer*. I don't care what you do.'

Now she felt really foolish. Why had she come out with all that stuff? It wasn't his business.

'If you don't need anything, I'll take my break,' she said tightly.

'Go right ahead.'

She skipped out of the line of fire, thought about visiting Mac in his trailer, but he'd been in a strange mood all day and she didn't feel like bothering him.

Just as she was turning the corner to hang out in the make-up trailer, she bumped into Tyrone.

He grabbed her arm. 'Hey - ' he said. 'You're working so hard I never got a chance to tell you how great your test was. If it had been my call I'd have hired you right then.'

'You would?'

'Oh, yeah.'

'Thanks,' she said, smiling broadly. There was nothing like praise to put her in a good mood.

'You eating from the truck? Or you want to catch a bite at this little Chinese place I know around the corner?'

'You're tempting me,' she said, thinking he looked like Denzel Washington with a Magic Johnson build - not a bad combination.

'Let's go.'

'Hmm . . . maybe I should tell Bobby, just in case he needs anything.'

'And she's diligent, too. I like that in a woman.'

They found Bobby sitting at one of the trestle-tables surrounded by admiring females.

'I'm kidnapping Jordanna,' Tyrone said. 'I'll have her back within the hour.'

Bobby barely glanced up. 'See that you do,' he said, 'or I'll dock her pay.'

Tyrone laughed. Jordanna didn't, she was too busy trying to figure out who all the women were. A couple of them were part of the production, but there were at least three others she couldn't place.

'Who's the cast of female talent?' she asked casually, once they were in Tyrone's car.

'Huh?'

'The women all around Bobby. It seems like he has a travelling fan club.'

'He does. They trail him everywhere, slipping him their phone number, telling him how much they loved his last movie - or hated it. Anything to grab his attention.'

Tyrone seemed like a pleasant enough guy. But Jordanna made a conscientious effort not to come on too strong. There

was no way she was about to jump into bed with him. The new Jordanna reigned supreme. No more one-night adventures. Although a joint would have been nice, she kind of missed running the clubs and getting high.

No. That was the old Jordanna. Now she had this whole new image to live up to. Jordanna Levitt - working girl. Could've been an actress, but it didn't work out.

When they arrived back at the location, Bobby was in deep conversation with Barbara Barr.

'What's *she* doing here?' Jordanna asked Tyrone, irritated that Barbara was on the set. 'She doesn't start until the end of next week.'

Tyrone shrugged. 'She's probably dropping by to meet everyone. Bobby encourages a family atmosphere.'

'It's not the crew she's meeting,' Jordanna pointed out, unable to hide her displeasure.

Tyrone threw her a quizzical look. 'You're not interested in Bobby, are you? 'Cause if you are, let me know and I'll back off.'

'Who me?' she said indignantly. 'Interested in Bobby? Oh, *case!*'

Just asking. I don't like to run second.'

'Ask away, because it's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I am *working* for him, and I respect his work, but as far as going out with Bobby Rush - *me?* C'mon, give me a break.'

'OK, so you don't want to go out with him, how about me?'

'How about you what?'

'How about you and me going out?'

'We just did - that Chinese meal was great.'

'I can offer you more than a Chinese meal.'

'Yeah? What?'

A smile spread across his face. 'Probably not anything you haven't seen before.'

'Ooh!' she said flirtatiously. 'I don't know about that.'

'Let me see,' he said. 'We're working all weekend, and then Tuesday's a day off. Dinner Tuesday night?'

'A deal.'

Barbara Barr stayed far too long, which really pissed Jordanna off as she watched from afar. No way was Barbara Barr right for Sienna, her doll-like prettiness didn't work for the role. Her long raven hair was obviously dyed and did not suit her sallow complexion. She was too short and her eyes were too close together.

Bobby, however, seemed quite taken – typical male – just because Barbara was giving him her full attention as if he was the only man on earth. Corny shit. Jordanna had given up doing that at sixteen. Bobby let Barbara sit in his director's chair, chatted to her between takes, and generally took no notice of anybody else.

Jordanna was there when he needed her, running and fetching and doing. Suddenly the glow was off the job. She felt like she was nothing more than a glorified errand girl.

Barbara ignored her. That was OK, she ignored her back.

Mac was in a vile mood. It was unlike him to be testy with the actors, but he was short with everyone.

All in all it wasn't a scintillating night, and she was delighted when they packed up at one a.m. Jumping into her Porsche she drove back to Bel Air playing Shabba Ranks full volume on her car stereo. Shooting by the guards at Marjory's, she pulled up behind a grey Ford, entered the house, and was surprised to find the butler standing in the front hall. 'Isn't it past your bedtime?' she asked.

'Miss Marjory is in the screening room with a . . . friend,' he said disapprovingly.

'What friend is that?'

'The detective gentleman.'

'Are they watching a movie?'

'I'm not sure, Miss Levitt. May I get you a drink, or something to eat?'

God, living at Marjory's was just like being in a luxury hotel with twenty-four-hour room service. 'No, thanks. I'll wander in and say good-night.'

'Yes, Miss Levitt.'

She opened the door to the screening room and stood.

the back watching the final scene of *The Godfather* play out. She was silently transfixed until the credits began to roll, and then she exclaimed, 'I love this movie! I try to see it at least once a year.'

Michael turned around as Marjory switched on the lights. He saw a beautiful young woman with long tousled dark hair and a devastating smile, wearing a battered leather jacket, faded jeans and combat boots.

Jordanna saw an incredibly good-looking man in his thirties with thick jet hair, intense eyes, an athletic body and a dangerous edge.

'Hi,' she said, with a friendly smile. 'You must be Mister Detective.'

'Michael Scorsini,' he said, getting to his feet.

'A nice Italian boy, huh?' she said, still smiling.

'You got the Italian right,' he replied. 'Nice and boy, hey, I'm not so sure.'

She laughed.

Marjory was agitated. 'Why are you back so early?' she questioned. 'I thought you were night shooting.'

Jordanna glanced at her watch. 'It's nearly two, isn't that late enough for you?'

Marjory edged closer to Michael. 'I'm fine,' she said, placing a possessive hand on his arm. 'Michael's taking excellent care of me.'

'Good,' Jordanna said, getting the message that Marjory did not want her around. 'I'll . . . uh . . . leave you two alone then.'

'Hey,' Michael said quickly, turning to Marjory, 'since your friend is home, perhaps it's not necessary for me to stay over.'

'You promised,' Marjory said, fixing him with a hurt expression.

'What's going on?' Jordanna asked, looking from one to the other.

'I had a phone call from the psycho,' Marjory said, 'the one who's been sending me letters. He threatened to kill me tonight.'

'Oh, great. Now I'll really sleep well,' Jordanna said, only half joking.

'If it'll make everyone feel better I'll stay,' Michael said.

'Do you pack a big gun?' Jordanna asked teasingly.

'Big enough.'

'Then *definitely* stay over.'

'You got it,' he replied, thinking that Jordanna was quite something, but had TROUBLE emblazoned on her forehead in big red letters.

She tilted her head. 'Is that a New York accent I detect?'

'Brooklyn.'

'And what's Brooklyn doing in Bel Air?'

He shrugged and made a face. 'Beats me.'

Marjory was getting even more agitated. 'Excuse me, Jordanna,' she said. 'Can I have a word with you?'

'Yeah, sure. What's up?'

Marjory steered her into the corridor outside the screening room. 'He's *mine*,' she hissed, red in the face.

'Excuse me?' Jordanna said blankly.

'He's mine,' Marjory repeated. 'He's here for *me*, not you.'

'What *are* you talking about?'

'Michael - I'm talking about Michael. You're flirting with him. You flirt with everybody. You think you can have anybody you want, but this one is mine.'

Jordanna threw her hands up. 'Oh, sorry - I didn't realize I was stepping on your territory. I thought he was your detective, not your lover. By the way, what *is* that you're wearing? Are you aware it's see-through?'

Marjory blushed an even darker shade of red, the colour rising in her cheeks. 'Michael likes me this way.'

'I didn't realize it had progressed this far. How come you haven't mentioned him before?'

'You don't know everything about me.'

This was true, Jordanna reasoned, even though they'd grown up together, Marjory had always been a loner, keeping to herself, never joining in the outrageous things that Cheryl and Jordanna got up to. Grant used to call her sexless, and

Shep claimed she was quietly crazy, but somehow she'd always been part of the Hollywood five.

'Look,' Jordanna said, yawning. 'I'm tired. I've had a tough day, and I can assure you I'm not trying to put a move on your guy. I'm going to bed, I'll see you in the morning.'

'Thank you,' Marjory said tightly.

Jordanna turned at the end of the corridor. 'Hey, I hope you are getting laid - it's about time.'

Before Marjory could reply she was out of sight.

Marjory returned to the screening room.

Michael feigned a yawn. 'I'm beat. We should call it a night.'

'Oh,' Marjory said, disappointed. 'I thought we could watch *Godfather Two*.'

'Tempting offer, but I gotta get some sleep. And so should you.'

'I suppose so,' she said, reluctantly.

'Don't worry, I'll be right next door if you need anything.'

'Yes . . . Michael.'

Gotta keep this on a very impersonal level, he thought to himself. This girl could go way over the edge - and he did not want to be the dumb schmuck at the receiving end of her



Since leaving prison he'd killed four women. Five if he counted The Girl who'd started it all. She was totally responsible for the deaths of these four women. It was her fault. He refused to take the blame.

Although he had to admit there was something extraordinarily pleasurable about doing away with these women.

He thought about their necks a lot, their soft white necks. Squeezing the life out of them was a very civilized way to kill.

There were two more women on his list. Two more females who had to be punished. Cheryl Landers and Jordanna Levitt. He'd purposely left them for last because they might not be as easy as the other four. They lived different lives.

When he was working on The Contract Cheryl and Jordanna had been regarded as nothing more than a joke. Two teenage girls with rich fathers and no experience. Yet they'd managed to stand up with the others and accuse him. They'd managed to say that they'd seen him kill The Girl.

Fortunate for him his uncle had connections. The best lawyers were hired to defend him and he'd gotten away with manslaughter. If it had been up to those six women who'd testified against him, he would have been jailed for life – he might even have drawn the death penalty.

Tracking each of the women had been easy. He still had in his possession the original crew and cast list from The Contract. Margarita Lynda and Stephanie Wolff had both lived at the same addresses. Gerda Hemsley had been a little more difficult to

find, but he'd tracked her. The Post Office had supplied him with Pamela March's new address.

He had home addresses for Jordanna Levitt and Cheryl Landers, and over the next few days he planned on making sure they were both still in residence.

The only problem was he could not decide which one to deal with first. He remembered Cheryl as a sour-faced girl, always complaining. And Jordanna was the restless one - marching around the set as though she owned the world.

He hated them both. He hated them so much more than the other four women, because Jordanna and Cheryl came from the kind of privilege he would have liked to have had. And for that they would be punished.

Today he would begin the tracking. Watching a victim days before the event was almost as exciting as the moment of finality.

He had plans for both Cheryl and Jordanna. Strangling them was too easy, they deserved to suffer as he had suffered.

Yes, he had big plans.

He spread the cast and crew sheet on the table studying it carefully. Cheryl Landers lived in Bel Air. Jordanna Levitt's home was in Beverly Hills.

Bel Air or Beverly Hills - where to start?

He realized this was not going to be so simple. Those big fancy mansions had security systems and guards. He was not naïve about the fact that people who lived in large expensive houses took more precautions.

But nobody could outsmart him. He'd done his time in prison. He'd endured countless acts of vile degradation and hadn't complained - the humiliations he'd put up with had made him strong. Stronger than most.

He tossed a coin to see where he would start. Bel Air or Beverly Hills. Which would it be?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Michael escaped from the Sanderson estate on Sunday morning by saying he had work to do – which was no lie.

When she saw he was leaving, Marjory acted distressed. 'But what if I receive another call?' she asked plaintively.

'Soon as I get hold of the tape equipment I'll be back,' he promised. 'On the way out I'll stop an' speak to the guards, tell 'em what's going on.'

'No,' she said vehemently. 'Daddy doesn't want anyone to know. If this got into the press it could be very harmful.'

'How's that?'

'Daddy shuns publicity, especially about me. He's always been nervous about kidnapping.'

'The guards *should* be alerted, Marjory.'

'They're always alert.'

'Then you have nothing to worry about,' he said, silently reminding himself to ask Quincy if he'd met the father, because in his opinion it was crazy if the guards weren't appraised of the situation.

Back at Quincy's house there were several messages. He punched on the machine and listened while he fixed himself a cup of coffee.

The first message was from the bodyguard of the young TV star. 'Trouble,' the bodyguard said. 'She punched out another girl in front of Club Sirocco a few nights ago. I

got her out of there in time, but somebody should pay a visit to the bouncer 'cause I've heard he's tryin' to sell his story.'

The second message was from Quincy's mother, enquiring after her grandchildren.

The third was a long complaint from Amber's girlfriend, Shelia. Michael listened to her message with amusement. 'Hi, this is Shelia. Just thought I'd touch base. I dated that friend of yours . . . Michael. Haven't heard from him since. Men are such bastards, they take you out, lure you into bed and that's the last you hear. Anyway, I wouldn't mind going out with him again - he *was* cute. Give me a call.'

The final message was from Quincy sounding extremely pissed. '*This* you ain't gonna believe. Me and a tree got very intimate - it's called a broken arm. I won't be back tomorrow. Where are you anyway? Hell of a house-sitter you turned out to be.'

Michael called him back immediately.

'I'm a one-man business, Mike, what am I gonna do? Quincy complained.

'You're not a one-man business any more,' Michael reminded him. 'I'm your new partner.'

'Can you handle things until I get back?'

'Yeah, I'm kind of getting used to it. I spent the night Marjory Sanderson's. You forgot to tell me we babysat, t Oh, an' there's a message from the guy who looks after your bad girl TV star.'

'Trouble?'

'Nothing I can't take care of.'

'And you'll go see Mac Brooks tomorrow?'

'You got it.'

'We're drivin' back on Tuesday. Check my red appointment book on the desk an' you'll find everybody's numbers listed - connections at the studios, all my clients.'

'Relax, OK? And the next time you go skiing be more careful.'

'Careful? *Shit!* You think I did this on purpose?'

'Yeah, that's what I think.'

'Asshole.'

'Putz.'



Bobby Rush knew he'd made a mistake. After shooting late on Sunday he'd taken his soon-to-be co-star, Barbara Barr, back to his house and back to his bed, where they'd indulged in two hours of very physical sex.

Now it was 6 a.m. Monday morning and he was regretting every minute of it. She didn't start work on the movie for another two weeks and he'd already compromised himself. Not that she wasn't pretty and talented with a sexy body. But getting involved with his co-star was a negative, it always led to big trouble, and he'd promised himself he would never do it again. Barbara was also overly demanding. He couldn't quite place what it was, but there was something about her that set off warning bells in his head.

He had another problem. Should he wake her and send her home? Or should he go to the studio leaving her alone in his house? There were papers and personal things all over the place and he hardly knew her, it wasn't a comfortable situation.

He made the decision to wake her.

'What time is it?' she sighed, stretching languorously.

'Late,' he lied. 'Time to get up.'

She rolled across the bed. 'You were hot last night, Bobby. A real hot fuck.'

Reviews were always interesting. 'I was?' he asked, not averse to hearing raves.

She sat up and the sheet slipped, revealing her ample breasts with extended nipples. 'I wouldn't say it if you weren't,' she murmured, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him close. 'I have never enjoyed giving head to anyone like I do to you. Your cock really turns me on.'

His sudden hard-on suggested that rushing to the studio didn't seem quite so important. He began touching her nipples with the tips of his fingers.

'Don't do that to me unless you mean it,' she moaned. 'I can't get through the day filled with the thought of your cock. I need it, and I need it now.' Her hands began feverishly unzipping his pants.

He forgot about it not being a good idea and fell on top of her.

She spread her legs. He began pounding into her fast and rough, the way she seemed to like it.

It was raw sex, very basic.

'You're the best fuck I ever had!' she exclaimed after a noisy climax.

Not exactly the perfect way to be described – flattering on one hand, but not so flattering on the other. What did she think he was? A screwing machine with no feelings?

Now that it was over he started regretting it again. Sneaking a quick peek at his watch he decided he just had time for another shower, then he had to get out of there; he didn't want to be late for his call.

She trailed him into the shower, naked and sweaty.

'Enough!' he said sternly, when she joined him under the running water and went for his cock again.

'It's never enough for me,' she said, getting on her knees while the water cascaded over her head.

Backing out of the glass door he reached for a towel.

'What's *your* fucking problem?' she yelled after him.

You're my fucking problem, he wanted to answer.

When she emerged from the shower it took her for ever to dress.

'I'll drop you home,' he said, when she was finally ready.

'Goody,' she replied cheerfully. 'That'll give me time to change and eat breakfast before I meet you for lunch.'

Who invited her to lunch? Certainly not him.

'Today's a bitch,' he said quickly. 'I won't have time for lunch.'

'Then I'll sit and watch.'

'Uh . . . I'm not crazy about people on the set when I'm shooting an important scene. It blows my concentration.'

She regarded him coolly. 'Do I feel rejection in the air?'

Jesus, why did he get himself into dumb situations? 'Are you nuts?' he said calmly.

'I hate rejection. It pisses me off.'

Something told him this one was a clinger. The sooner he cooled it the better.

He drove straight to her apartment and pulled up outside.

'How about I cook you dinner and have it waiting when you come home?' she suggested brightly – a woman of many moods. 'Do you want to give me your key?'

No, I do not want to give you my key.

'I have a business dinner tonight,' he said, trying to sound suitably disappointed.

She threw him a penetrating stare. 'I'm beginning to think you regret what we did last night and this morning.'

His reply was smooth as silk. 'How could I possibly regret being with you?'

Even as he said it, his words rang horribly false. Maybe that's what Kennedy Chase had nailed him on. Maybe he *was* nothing more than a charming jerk with an excellent line in bullshit.

Oh, great, nothing like putting oneself down to start the day.

'When *will* I see you?' she persisted.

'I'll call you later,' he promised.

'You'd better,' she said, half joking, half not. 'Or I'll have to punish you in a really bad way.'

At last she got out of his car. He watched her enter her building. When was he going to learn? No actresses.

They were shooting in the Ambassador Hotel. He drove there fast, Sade on his stereo to soothe him on his way.

When he arrived, Mac was standing by the catering truck getting breakfast. 'Morning,' he said. 'How was your night?'

'What night?' Mac said sourly. 'We didn't finish until one.'

Bobby yawned. 'Yeah, you're right, it was a tough one. But I think we got some good stuff, don't you? Can't wait to see dailies.'

'Are you eating?'

'No, gotta go straight to make-up - see you on the set.'

He sat in the make-up trailer staring at his reflection. It was a well-known fact that Jerry Rush had nailed every one of his leading ladies. Was he turning into his father? He did not want to be known as Bobby Rush - movie star and major cocksman.

On the other hand, what was he supposed to do? There was nothing wrong with having a fast one-nighter if he felt like it.

She's an actress, his inner voice warned.

Yeah, well, I'm an actor - so what?

Jordanna tracked him to the make-up trailer and handed him a cup of coffee. 'You look like you had a long hard night,' she said amiably. 'You've got bags under your eyes' could pack clothes in.'

He glared at her. 'When I want your personal critique I ask you.'

'Yes, sir, Mr Rush.'

'Where's my script?' he asked irritably.

'In your trailer.'

'Can you get it?'

'But, of course . . . sir.'

Jordanna had a smart mouth. She'd be a good assistant if he could only survive her attitude.

'Do me a favour,' he called after her. 'Bring my portable phone, too.'

She hurried to his trailer and picked up the script and the phone. On her way back she bumped into Mac. 'You feeling OK?' she asked, stopping for a moment.

Did she know something? Jordanna had always been extremely intuitive. 'Why? Don't I look well?' he said warily.

'You always look well, Mac - for an old guy.'

'Very amusing, Jordanna.'

'I'm trying to put a smile on your face. I haven't seen one there lately.'

'I've got a few personal problems.'

'Sharleen?'

'No, not Sharleen,' he said, guardedly. 'My wife and I are very happy.'

'I'm thrilled to hear it.'

'You really *are* a smart ass.'

'I'm *really* fed up with hearing that.'

'Then stop acting like one.'

'You know what the problem is, Mac? I say what's on my mind. I don't hang back. So if that makes me a smart ass – too bad.'

He shook his head and walked away. He was not in the mood for Jordanna's shit, he was too worried about Zane and what he might do next.

He wondered if he should warn Jordanna to be exceptionally careful, because if anything happened to her he'd never forgive himself . . .

No, nothing would happen to Jordanna. Besides, he was meeting with the private investigator later, everything would be taken care of.

When Jordanna and Cheryl were called to testify at Zane's trial, Jordan Levitt and Ethan Landers had tried to fix it so they didn't have to appear in court. But both girls had been adamant, they'd absolutely insisted on testifying. Foolish decision.

At the time Mac had been in constant touch with Luca Carlotti. 'I can't afford to be connected to Zane in any way,' he'd warned his godfather. 'I must be kept out of this. I give an actor a job – that's all I know.'

Fortunately Luca had agreed with him. 'Zane has no idea who you are,' he'd said. 'I never even mentioned we knew each other.'

'Good. It's imperative we keep it that way.'

'Personally,' Luca had ruminated, ~~his words were cutting~~
'I'd like to kill the dumb motherfucker. What the hell the bastard does a thing like that? In front of witnesses.'

'He's *your* nephew, not mine.'

Mac had always harboured the thought that Luca must have been sent to the electric chair. For his sake.

Now he had to find out if Zane was in the same line

could have called Luca, but he didn't care to do so. The less he had to do with Luca Carlotti, the better.

☆ ☆ ☆

A production assistant stopped Jordanna on her way back to the make-up trailer, handing her several new script pages. She took them to Bobby, who flicked through them before asking her to attach them to his script. She sat in the corner doing so, while he activated his portable phone. She pretended not to listen, but of course she did.

He called Barbara, knowing he had to ease out of the situation he'd gotten himself into as quickly and cleanly as possible. He decided the best thing to do was be truthful and tell her their one night of sex was a mistake.

'I'm sorry if you thought I rushed off this morning,' he said, speaking close to the receiver. Pause. 'Yeah, I had a good time, too. Lunch tomorrow?' Another pause. 'Sure. I happen to have the day off.'

Lunch was good. It would give him an opportunity to convince her that getting involved was a bad move for both of them.

As soon as he hung up, Jordanna was by his side. 'Shall I book you a table at Le Dôme or Cicada?' she asked, little Miss Efficient.

'Beth will take care of it,' he said shortly.

Hmm . . . Jordanna thought, that means he doesn't want me to know. That means he's having lunch with Barbara Barr. That means he took Barbara home last night and probably fucked her senseless.

Was he nuts? Barbara Barr had a reputation for being a maniac, any idiot knew that.

For some unknown reason Jordanna was filled with an unfamiliar feeling of dismay.

She couldn't be jealous, could she?

No way. Why would I be jealous of Barbara Barr?

Because you like Bobby.

I do not!

Oh yes you do!

She hurried from the make-up trailer, dashed straight over to Kraft Service and wolfed down three sugar doughnuts and two cans of 7-Up. Then she felt sick.

Satisfied, dear?

Screw you.



He tried not to look impressed, but Michael had never visited a film set before. Oh, sure, he'd seen plenty of movies being shot on the streets of New York, but now he was in Hollywood and this was the real thing. It was kind of exciting.

Unfortunately they were not shooting at a studio – the location was the Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard. He drew into the parking lot and left his car alongside a line of trailers. Then he walked towards the building, stopping to ask a guard where the filming was taking place.

'You'll find them inside the grand ballroom,' the guard said, waving his newspaper in the general direction of the hotel.

Strolling through the spacious grounds, Michael marvelled at the old hotel – it was quite something. Way back he'd read it was the hang-out of all the big stars of the thirties and forties – Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner – what a time that must have been!

When he reached the set they were in the middle of shooting a scene. He hovered on the periphery, fascinated by the activity.

Looking around, he recognized Mac Brooks from pictures he'd seen of him with his wife, Sharleen Wynn Brooks, the very sexy movie star. Lucky guy.

As soon as Mac called 'Cut', Michael started over to him.

His path was blocked by a young black production assistant with dreadlocks and a sharp attitude. 'Can I help you?' she asked officiously.

'I got a meeting with Mac Brooks.'

'Is he expecting you?'

'Yes.'

'Your name?'

'Michael Scorsini, uh . . . from the Robbins Agency.'

'Wait here, I'll see if I can get his attention.'

She went and conferred with Mac, who glanced over and waved. When she came back she was slightly more friendly. 'He'll be finished with this shot shortly. Grab a seat and hang out - there's a few empty ones over there.'

He sat in a high canvas director's chair and wondered what it must be like to be an actor. All that attention. All that money. All that power.

Not that he'd ever had any ambitions in that direction, although in high school the acting coach had always been after him to join the drama group.

Bobby Rush hit the set movie-star style, surrounded by an entourage. Michael immediately recognized the dark-haired girl he had met at Marjory's. He waited until they started blocking the scene, then got up, made his way over and tapped her on the shoulder. 'Remember me?'

She turned and looked at him with surprise. 'Hey, Brooklyn!' she exclaimed.

'Hey, Bel Air!' he responded.

'What are you doing here?'

'I got a meeting with Mac Brooks.'

He grinned. 'I see you survived your night at the oleum.'

'Do you feel the same way about that house as I do?'

'I'm only staying there on a temporary basis until I get my place. Marjory's been a friend for a long time. We were in school together.'

'Really? She seems kinda . . . neurotic.'

'I wasn't going to be the one to say it, but, uh . . . yeah, I always thought she was slightly crazy.'

'What do you make of these letters she's been getting?'

'I don't know - what do *you* think?'

'I haven't formed an opinion.'

'Look, if her father's paying, you may as well stick with the gig. She likes having you around, make the most of it.'

'What's *that* supposed to mean?'

'Hey, c'mon, Brooklyn, get real. You're a good-looking guy, Marjory will inherit everything when big Daddy slides off. You could be on easy street here.'

He did not appreciate her thinking he was only around to take advantage of Marjory. 'I'm working for her,' he said tightly. 'That's *all* I'm doing.'

'Sorry,' she said blithely. 'Forget I said anything.'

'I will.'

They stood in silence for a moment watching the rehearsal.

'OK, Brooklyn,' Jordanna said, genuinely curious. 'Give me the juice. What are you seeing Mac about?'

'Private business.'

'I bet I know. He's discovered Sharleen's having an affair and wants her followed.'

'You've got some imagination.'

'Are you like the private detectives in those cool Raymond Chandler novels? Do you leap out at people brandishing a Polaroid when they're in the bedroom making out?'

'You're behind the times. If I was going to do that I'd have an electronic camera embedded in the ceiling.'

'Ooh, very hi-tech.'

'Quiet please!' the first assistant yelled. 'We're going for a take. Everyone settle down.'

Michael watched them shoot a scene between Bobby and Cedric Farrell, the actor playing his father. They did the scene five times until Mac was satisfied, then he conferred with his cinematographer, walked over to Michael, shook his hand and said, 'Glad you could make it, Michael. Quincy comes highly recommended. Where is he today?'

'A skiing accident.'

'So, you guys are partners?'

'Yeah, we were detectives on the force back in New York, now we're together again.'

'What I have to say today is confidential,' Mac said. 'Very

confidential...I don't want to read about myself in *The Enquirer*?

'We got a reputation to protect. You can trust us.'

'Let's go to my trailer.'

They left the set, walking through the empty hotel all the way outside until they reached Mac's luxurious trailer.

'Take a seat,' Mac said.

Michael sat down on the built-in couch. 'So,' he said, 'why don't you tell me what's on your mind?'

'I've been in this business a long time,' Mac said, pacing around. 'Made a lot of movies.'

'I know. I've seen most of them. You do great work. Mac liked the fact that this detective was smart enough to have seen all his movies – or at least most of them. 'Did you see *The Contract*?''

'Yeah – powerful movie.'

'It was, wasn't it?'

'That ending was really something. Had me on the edge of my seat.'

'Do you remember the story that hit the press while I was making that film?'

'Uh... I don't recall anything.'

'A murder took place. A young actress was strangled by one of the actors working on my film. We tried to keep it low profile, but it made headlines.'

'Now that you mention it...'

'I recast both roles – never used Ingrid or the actor in the movie. There was a trial and he was sent to jail. As far as I was concerned that was the end of it.'

'So?'

'During the trial six women gave evidence against him. All six of them witnessed the murder.'

'I'm listening.'

'In the last couple of months three of those women have been killed.'

'Excuse me?'

'You heard me correctly. Three have been murdered.'

'Is the actor still in jail?'

'That's what I want you to find out. Z... Marion Ricca got fourteen years for manslaughter.'

'Fourteen years ago?'

'No, seven. But I'm almost sure he must be out.'

'That's about right. In California his sentence would be automatically halved. Have you told the cops?'

'Why do you think *you're* here? No more headlines. I can't be involved in this. You'll find out if he's been released, and if he has, how we can protect the other three women. Because if he has a list, believe me, they're definitely on it.'



CHAPTER THIRTY

The last thing Kennedy felt like sitting through was an interview with Charlie Dollar. Especially since a new murder had taken place, and she was anxious to investigate further.

Her appearance on TV had garnered quite a reaction. 'We're stirring 'em up,' Rosa assured her. 'I've heard the Chief of Police and the Mayor's office are finally getting into it. We're forcing 'em into action. They'll have to make an announcement soon, or there'll be a public outcry.'

'That's great,' Kennedy said, delighted that something was happening.

'My news director wants you to appear again. He sees this as an ongoing story. In fact, he'd like you to be on once a week until they catch this maniac.'

Kennedy agreed. Anything to help nail the killer. She knew that somewhere up there Phil and her father were watching her. Hopefully they were proud she was working on something worthwhile.

In the meantime she was stuck interviewing another star. This time the lucky victim was Charlie Dollar — a man who picked up his own phone. She'd actually gotten to him when arranging the appointment, an unusual experience when dealing with a celebrity. He'd given her directions to his house and told her he'd expect her at noon.

When she arrived, she was surprised that he answered the door himself. 'Hey, lady journalist, come on in,' Charlie said, greeting her warmly. Two big dogs sprang to attention.

'Take no notice of the killers,' he said, leading her through to the living room. 'I got 'em trained – they only bite other actors.'

He had the wildest smile she'd ever seen, and glittering stoned eyes. Even though he was slightly balding and a little paunchy, he was definitely attractive in his brightly coloured Hawaiian shirt, pale beige Chinos that had seen better days, and scuffed white sneakers with no socks.

'Sit down,' he said, waving towards the couch.

She checked out her surroundings, deciding she liked his house, it was lived in and comfortable, not designer decorated to the last inch like most Beverly Hills homes. Obviously he'd surrounded himself with things he loved. The old brown leather couch was worn and welcoming; there were interesting paintings on the walls; the dogs wandered around as if they owned the place; and Charlie seemed perfectly at ease.

'Let's start by taking a detour an' going off the record,' he said with an endearing grin.

'Sure,' she agreed.

'Ysee, I got this raging desire to smoke a joint, but not if it offends you. Oh, yeah, an' don't mention it in your story – that's all I ask.'

Didn't he know he was stepping on dangerous territory? His opening line was almost too good *not* to write about.

'Can I trust you, Kennedy?' he asked, fixing her with his crazy seen-it-all eyes.

'I suppose so,' she said reluctantly.

'Good,' he said, lighting a joint and taking a deep drag.

This was a new one, an actor who dared to get stoned in front of a journalist. She admired his balls.

'You really did a kill on Bobby Rush,' he remarked, offering her a drag.

She shook her head. 'It wasn't me, but I guess I have to take the blame.'

Unperturbed, Charlie took another long pull. 'What happened?'

'My copy was changed and expanded. I feel bad about it. Trust me, it will never happen again.'

'I hope not.'
'Don't worry, you're completely protected. I now have a contract that precludes them from changing a word.'
'Bobby's an OK guy,' Charlie said, through a haze of smoke. 'It's a bum rap growing up in this town with a famous parent. He's doin' good.'

'I would say having a famous parent makes life easier. Money, privilege . . . anything you wish for.'
'I never fight with lady journalists, but you're wrong.'
She decided to change the subject. 'You have a little boy, don't you?'

A pleased grin spread across his face. 'Sure do. His name is Sport, and he's the greatest.'

'On the record, are you planning to marry his mother?' Charlie chuckled again. 'You'd better ask Dahlia whether *she's* planning on marrying *me*. I simply do what people ask me to. If I make it through the day, then I'm a happy movie star!'

Charlie had an extremely seductive, easy-going manner, his charm was addictive.

'Do you mind if I use a tape recorder?' she asked, reaching into her purse and extracting a small Sony cassette machine.

'Show me yours - I'll show you mine,' he replied, with a stoned smile.

'*You* want to tape *me*?'

'I'm sure neither of us would appreciate the inconvenience of being misquoted.'

He got up and came back with a portable Panasonic recorder which he placed on the table in front of them. 'We're even,' he said.

'Hmm . . . ' Kennedy said, 'and I never had you tagged as suspicious.'

They exchanged a long look.

'*You* are one good-looking broad,' Charlie said at last. 'Broad?' she said with a mixture of amusement and contempt.

'Uh-oh, I smell a feminist in the room.'

She smiled coolly. 'Sweet talk will get you absolutely

nowhere.' She activated her tape. 'Can we ~~show~~ your movie?'

He leaned forward, clicking on his machine. 'I would deem that a great favour. All people usually care about is my personal life.' He paused, then waved his arms dramatically in the air, taking on a Shakespearian stance. 'Who do I fuck - that is the question,' he emoted, sounding more like a grand stage actor than his usual self.

'Are you going to answer it?'

'People aren't interested in the essence of an actor - all they want is this personal shit. Tabloid to the man that's America today.'

'I've seen you in the tabloids.'

'Can't avoid it. Wish I could.'

'Let's start with that. What do you think of the ~~series~~ that appear about you?'

'Fairy stories,' he snorted disdainfully. 'The ~~reality~~ reality is that people believe 'em.'

'You really think so?'

'Talk to any of the maids and everybody's ~~going to~~ come at me waving a paper sayin', "Did you see ~~what~~ Jackson did?" Or Marlon Brando. Or Jack ~~Nicholson~~ like baby, they are *true* believers.'

'Is everything written in the tabloids then?'

'Sometimes there's a micron of truth. But then they ~~have~~ got a column to fill every week, so they're ~~making~~ things up. An' if they don't ~~invent~~ they ~~embellish~~ embellish. The a word - embellish!'

He seemed to have a habit of ~~reeling off~~ to lure him back. 'Let's talk about your movie ~~one~~ day. Why did you decide to produce it ~~yourself~~?''

His eyebrows shot up, giving him an ~~open~~ look. 'Why not? When I'm in a movie I ~~think~~ go off making my own decisions. Wouldn't you?'

'Is this a new trend for you? Do you ~~think~~ in the future you'll produce all your films?'

'Haven't made up my mind yet. I ~~think~~ ~~was~~ you were married to Philip ~~Chase~~'

She was startled. 'Uh . . . yes . . . How did you know?'
'Cause I followed his work. Yours, too. Liked that piece you wrote on Anita Hill. And the stuff you got into about the Bush Administration was admirable. But my favourite work of yours and Phil's were the pieces you did together for *National Geographic*. His pictures were outstanding. Lady, you two sure got around.'

'Yes, we did,' she said quietly, impressed that Charlie knew who Phil was.

'I was real sorry to read that he died.'
Inexplicably her eyes filled with tears. It was still so painful to talk about Philip.

Charlie observed her discomfort. 'Hey, I got me an idea,' he said, jumping to his feet. 'We'll drive down to the beach for lunch. I'll treat you to crab cakes at Ivy on the Shore, order you an exotic drink, and we'll pretend we're on vacation. How about it?'

It sounded good. Why resist? 'If that's what you'd like to do,' she said, feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable.

He grabbed her hands, pulling her up from the couch. 'C'mon, sweet green eyes, follow me. I'm the king of how to forget your worries an' stay happy. Let's do it!'

☆ ☆ ☆

Cheryl Landers was on a power trip. She had the attention of some of the most important men in town. All of a sudden she was a major player. No longer known as just Ethan's daughter, she was finally free. And making mucho bucks. What an exhilarating high!

Her girls were the best. Once she'd taken over Donna's list, she'd weeded out the druggies and trouble-makers, and solicited some fine new talent. First class service all the way was her motto. You pay top price and you get top pussy. Everyone was happy. Especially Grant, who not only tried out new girls for her and supplied the drugs that quite a few clients requested, but also did an excellent recruiting job, bringing her would-be talent on an almost daily basis.

Cheryl found there was another advantage to being *the* Hollywood madam. Men. They all desired her approval, and she could play with them the way she'd always wanted.

She and Grant had started a regular exclusive Saturday-night late party at her house and it was a hot ticket. The guest list was exciting. Beautiful girls who got paid for their services, and horny powerful men who seemed to get off on shelling out big bucks. Several movie stars were regular attendees; an English rock superstar who went through the girls by the dozen; producers, studio executives and a scattering of Euro-trash.

She kept her Arab clientele separate. They paid for their own parties, and she made sure they paid double.

Grant was seriously considering dropping out of the agency business and becoming her partner. 'Your entire operation could be bigger and better,' he said, trying to persuade her. 'We'd send girls all over the world – *maybe* even work out a franchise. The possibilities are limitless.'

She'd been paying him a commission for the girls he found, and since business was so good why not bring him in – not as a full partner, but allowing him to collect a percentage wouldn't bother her. As long as he didn't get too stoned he would certainly be an asset. He could take over many of her responsibilities, and she'd enjoy having him around on a more permanent basis.

He was sulky when she told him her plan – he wanted fifty per cent of her take or nothing.

'OK, nothing,' she bluffed.

He agreed to thirty per cent and quit the agency.

Cheryl was delighted. Nobody knew it – not even Jordanna – but growing up she'd always harboured a secret crush on Grant. It started when she'd hit puberty, and continued over the years. She'd never told anyone because it was painfully obvious bimbos were his women of choice. Grant always went for the exterior – the big-breasted, long hair, fat glossy lips look. He'd never second-glanced her – she wasn't pretty enough, her breasts were too small, and besides, he'd always regarded her as one of the boys – and

although they'd had fun together, it had never gone any further.

Over the years Cheryl had sat back, watched and waited. Now she was in an excellent position, she was about to be his boss, and total control would be hers.

Cheryl had decided that if you wanted something badly enough you *could* have it. And she wanted Grant. She'd waited almost twelve years, wasn't that long enough?

☆ ☆ ☆

Charlie was an interesting man, he did not try to charm — just did. He seemed totally oblivious to his fame, which made him even more attractive.

People loved Charlie. They waved at him from their cars as he sped down the freeway behind the wheel of his black Rolls, grinning his maniacal grin, playing Sinatra, swigging from a flask of something he assured her was distilled water, although she suspected it was pure vodka.

'I wouldn't expect you to have a car like this,' she said, fingering the expensive leather seat.

He creased his forehead, genuinely puzzled. 'Why do people always say that?'

She gestured vaguely. 'I don't know. It's — it's too ... grown up.'

He chuckled. 'Surprise, surprise, I *am* grown up.'

'How old *are* you?' she asked curiously. Reports varied pegging him as anything from forty-nine to fifty-five.

'Mentally twelve. Physically — a hundred and twelve. Spiritually fifty-three. It's a bitch, but it's better than alternative.'

'Which is?'

'Dead,' he said flatly. 'I lost a lot of loyal buddies in Vietnam.'

'Were you there?'

He lowered the volume on Sinatra. 'Sure I was. What did I learn the valuable lesson that to get to the top, you have to be a bastard?'

'College?' she said facetiously.

A hollow laugh. 'Naw. Never went. Dropped outta High School at fifteen an' hit the road. That's a whole loada higher education right there.'

'I'm sure.'

'How about you, green eyes? Give me the story.'

'High school. College. The entire process.'

'Sounds conventional.'

'I met Phil in college, we got married and travelled the world together. He was a very special man.'

'Ain't it a bitch – it's always the good ones that go first. You must miss him a lot.'

She didn't know what to say. How did you put into words the unbearable pain of losing someone close to you? It was impossible. 'I do,' she said quietly.

Charlie swerved across three lanes of speeding traffic and just about made it to the Santa Monica exit.

'Driving's not your greatest skill,' she gulped, bracing herself against the dashboard.

'The trick is,' he said, with a perverse smile, 'never to hit anything, an' *never* to have anything hit you. That's my philosophy. Think about it, it's sure worked for me.'

Their lunch together was enjoyable. She couldn't remember laughing so much in a long time. But there was also a serious side lurking beneath Charlie's light-hearted exterior. Apart from being one of the greatest film actors of his generation, he was also an extremely complex and interesting man. When he suggested dinner the next night she readily agreed. Wait until she told Rosa about *this* one!

After lunch, Charlie drove her back to his house where she picked up her car and headed straight to the television studio. Rosa and the news director were waiting for her. They spent the afternoon going over material for her appearance that night. She got the facts on Pamela March, the latest murder victim. Pamela had been strangled late Friday in West Hollywood – Detective Carlyle territory. She was a small-time actress, divorced with no children. Thirty-one years old, she had been walking her dog when she was attacked. Exactly

the same MO as Stephanie Wolff. Only this time there was no death-to-the-traitors sign left on the body.

'But it has to be the same killer, right?' Kennedy questioned, still scanning the information.

'Unless it's a copy-car murder,' Rosa replied. 'Sometimes that's what happens.'

This time Kennedy fought against make-up and hair. She insisted on doing her own, applying a smoky brown eye-shadow and a deeper lipstick. Then she brushed her honey-coloured hair until it casually framed her face.

Going over her copy she felt surprisingly calm. It read well, she was pleased with what she'd written.

Before the broadcast she wandered into the Green Room and up a chocolate chip cookie and nibbled on it.

Rosa entered a few minutes later. 'Everything OK?' 'This is a cinch,' she replied, not feeling at all nervous. 'I'm getting used to it.'

Told you you'd grow to love it! Rosa exclaimed, grabbing a bottle of Evian on her way out. 'See you on the set. We've got a busy show. Oh, and, by the way, if you bump to Michael, do me a favour and try not to insult him.'

'Michael who?'

'Scorsini. The New York detective with the missing kid. Remember? He's on again tonight.'

'What a coincidence,' she said, shaking her head.

'I told you, you're safe, he's not dating and has no desire to, just like you.'

'Sure.'

Rosa laughed. 'Honestly,' she said, vanishing out the door. 'One of these days you'll learn to believe me.'

Kennedy perched on the edge of the couch and glanced through her notes again. Four women. Brutally murdered. There was a strangler on the loose and she had to help stop him before he claimed a fifth victim.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



After leaving Mac, Michael drove over and talked to the doorman at Club Sirocco about the badly behaved TV star, but his mind was elsewhere. The meeting with Mac Brooks was really bothering him. Women were getting killed, Mac thought he knew who was doing it, and he'd only now decided to say something. Didn't these Hollywood people have a fucking social conscience?

The first thing he'd done after leaving Mac was call a contact in the LAPD asking him to run a check on Zane Marion Ricca. An hour later he'd received the information that Zane had been released from jail three months ago. He'd also scanned newspaper reports on the murdered women. He'd come across a fourth victim, Gerda Hemsley, and wondered if she'd also worked on Mac's movie.

He couldn't believe that this insane guy was somewhere out there running riot, and nobody was doing a goddamn thing.

He reached Mac on the set. 'I've got news,' he said tensely.

'Just remember I'm speaking on a cellular phone,' Mac said warningly. 'I have people all around me.'

Is that all he cared about? That someone might hear him? 'The party we spoke about is on the loose. What do you want me to do about it?'

Now that he knew for sure, Mac panicked. He had to reach Luca and tell him. 'Nothing,' he said.

'Nothing,' Michael repeated.

'For now.'
'By the way,' Michael added. 'Does the name Gerda Hemsley mean anything to you?'
'Yes, why?'
'Add her to the list. She was strangled two weeks ago.'

☆ ☆ ☆

Mac was bad-tempered with everyone. So much so that Bobby came to him at the end of a set-up and said, 'What's your problem?'

'It's personal,' Mac replied shortly. 'I'll work it out.'
'Something to do with Sharleen?'
Why did everybody always think it was Sharleen?

'Everything with Sharleen is fine,' he said irritably. 'This is nothing for you to concern yourself with.'

Bobby stared at him for a moment, trying to decide whether he needed to push it further. 'OK, OK, I'm not concerned,' he said at last. 'But try and take it easy on the crew, they're about ready to mutiny if you don't lighten up.'

At the lunch break, Mac shut himself in his trailer, ready to make the call.

A million and one excuses not to come to mind. Luca might not be home. He could be busy. Maybe he was out of town. It was also unwise to conduct this particular conversation on a cellular phone, people listened in for sport, it could be dangerous.

The last reason convinced him. He left his trailer and went back to the hotel, making his way into the offices at the front where a pretty secretary asked if she could help him.

'I'm Mac Brooks - the director of *Thriller Eyes*,' he said, giving himself billing. 'Is there somewhere I can make a private call?'

'Certainly, Mr Brooks,' she said, impressed.

He followed her into an empty office where she assured him he would have complete privacy.

Waiting until she closed the door behind her, he punched out Luca's number.

A guarded male voice answered the phone.

'Let me speak to Luca Carlotti,' Mac said, keeping his voice low just in case the secretary had X-ray ears.

'Who wants him?'

'Tell him Mr Brooks from California. He'll know.'

'Hold on.'

He began picking at a hang-nail, tearing at his skin until it throbbed. Sweat beaded his forehead. Why was this phone call making him so agitated?

Because he was dangerously close to being exposed, as Luca Carlotti's godson, and if the truth came out it could ruin his career. Even Sharleen didn't know.

He wondered what she'd say if he confessed. *Hey, Sharleen, sweetheart - there's something I haven't told you. My godfather is one of the most notorious mob guys in New York. What do you think of that?*

Sharleen would probably say, so what? She wouldn't understand the ramifications. Besides, she had this attitude that nothing mattered unless it directly concerned her.

Luca's unmistakable raspy growl. 'Mac?'

'Hey, how ya doin?'' Automatically he slipped into his old Brooklyn accent.

'Doin' good,' Luca replied. 'What's kickin' with you? Still out on the coast?'

He cleared his throat. 'There's a problem,' he said hoarsely.

Luca chuckled. 'So what else is new? Problems I'm here t'solve.'

'This is your problem, too.'

'Spit it on the table.'

'Your sister's kid - he's out.'

'Yeah,' Luca said calmly. 'That ain't news t'me.'

He was amazed. 'You mean you *knew*?'

'The fucker's bin out three months.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I gotta report in to you?'

Mac felt the fury building inside him. Luca was treating him with no respect, and that was one thing his father had

instilled in him. *Get people to respect you and you'll never be less than a man.*

Sure. It had done his father a lot of good. Luca had respected the shit out of him while screwing his mother. He'd never forgive Luca for that.

'You should've told me,' he said angrily. 'You should've fucking told me.'

Luca's voice hardened. 'I shoulda done what I think i right, an' I did. I gave instructions to that shit-faced cool sucker t'stay put on the West Coast. He ain't welcome ba here. I sent him money. Gave him a place to live. What do I care, as long as he stays outta *my* life.'

Mac was incredulous. 'And you thought that was it? He'd take the money and leave everyone alone?'

'He'd better, unless he's a dumb fuckin' moron.'

'Well, I've got news for you, Luca, he *is* a moron. A dangerous one. I think he's systematically murdering each of the women who testified against him at his trial. Four of them are already dead.'

There was a long ominous silence. He waited for Luca to say something. His hands were trembling. He didn't want to be involved in this, but he *was*, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Luca finally spoke. 'You sure about this?'

'Who else could it be?' he replied evenly. 'Four of them killed within the last couple of months. Strangled the same way Ingrid was strangled. And there's two other girls who gave evidence - they could be next.'

'Do the cops know?'

'They'll put it together eventually.'

'Shit!' Luca said furiously. 'That motherfucking dumb as prick!'

'Where is he?' Mac didn't really want the information, but he was unable to stop himself from asking.

'LA.'

'I realize that, but where in LA?'

Luca ignored his question. 'I'll tell you what I'm go

do, son,' he said slowly. 'I'm gonna take care of this one myself. I'll be on a plane first thing tomorrow.'

Don't call me son, Mac wanted to scream. 'What do you mean you'll take care of it yourself?' he asked.

'Not on the phone. We'll talk when I get there.'

'How about the other girls? Shouldn't they be warned?'

'When was the last murder?'

'A few nights ago.'

'And before that? How long between attacks?'

'A couple of weeks. I'm not sure.'

'It looks like he's workin' to a pattern. They're safe.'

'How can you possibly know they're safe?' Mac exploded.

Luca did not take kindly to being yelled at. 'You want my help or not?' he said coldly. 'Because it'd be just as easy to call the cops and bust this whole deal wide open.'

'Yes, I want your help,' Mac said, calming down.

'I'll be there tomorrow.'

Mac left the office with a heavy heart.

'Can I do anything else for you, Mr Brooks?' the secretary asked with a bright I-could-be-a-star smile.

'No, no, uh . . . charge the call to the studio.'

'That's OK, Mr Brooks, compliments of me. And if you're ever looking for a girl to play a secretary – how about using the real thing?'

His mind was elsewhere. 'Yeah, yeah, sure.'



Luca Carlotti was always impeccably dressed. He favoured pin-striped Savile Row suits made by his personal tailor who flew to New York from London every two months to confer with him. His shoes were handmade, also in London, at an exclusive shop on Jermyn Street. His shirts were the finest silk, and his sweaters and overcoats pure cashmere.

Once every two weeks Luca had a facial to keep his sixty-four-year-old skin smooth, he favoured Erno Laszlo products. Every other day he had a full body massage and once a

week he indulged in a mineral mud bath. One room in his home had been converted into a tanning parlour so that he always had a nice deep tan. Luca believed in pampering himself. With his slicked-back hair and hooded eyes, Luca Carlotti was quite the dandy.

Mac's phone call disturbed him. His sister's idiot son was the bane of his life. He should have ordered a hit on the kid while he was locked up, but out of the kindness of his heart he'd allowed the boy to live. Big mistake.

'There's no way he's comin' back to New York,' he'd warned his sister, Phyllis, when Zane was first released from jail.

'But he's my baby—' Phyllis had started to say.

'He ain't your baby, he's a murdering bastard who'll stay in California outta the family's way. I got a house I can put him in. Don't worry, I'll send him money.'

Phyllis didn't object too greatly. She'd recently divorced her first husband who was doing time in Attica, and she was now married to her second — a schmuck called Petey (the Wild Man) Borosin. Petey was twenty years younger than Phyllis and Luca couldn't stand the sight of the punk, but at least he kept his sister happy.

Now, according to Mac, his stupid sonofabitch nephew was running around killing people.

Luca decided not to tell Phyllis, better she didn't know. Women had big mouths. They couldn't help it, information leaked from them like sieves.

He called his personal travel agent and booked an early morning flight to LA.

☆ ☆ ☆

Michael picked up the tape equipment he needed to bug Marjory's phone and drove over to the Sanderson estate late in the afternoon.

Marjory greeted him like a worried wife. 'You promise you'd be here this morning,' she said, biting anxiously on her lower lip.

What was it with her? 'I never said what time I'd be back,' he said, working on her phone – attaching the equipment.

'I feel so . . . alone,' she said, wringing her hands.

This was one hysterical woman. 'You're not alone, Marjory. I'm here now.'

'Can you stay?'

He made sure everything was in place. 'No, I have too much work to do.'

'What if I get another call?'

'It's hardly likely. The guy's been sending you letters for months now. The first time he phoned was yesterday, he won't make a habit of it.'

'How do you know?' she asked accusingly.

'If he phones again, you'll contact me and I'll be here. This time we'll have him on tape. Here, let me show you how to work this.'

When he was satisfied she had it down he said, 'I gotta make a phone call. Where can I be alone?'

'Is it to do with my case?'

'No, it's something else I'm working on.'

Her mouth tightened. 'Very well,' she said. 'You can use this phone.'

'Thanks.'

She stood near him, staring.

He waited for her to shift, she didn't. 'Uh, Marjory, this is private.'

'I won't listen.'

'I'm sure you won't, but you wouldn't appreciate me discussing *your* case in front of other people, would you?'

'I'll be outside,' she said, marching stiffly from the room.

He reached Mac at the location. 'Did you decide what you want me to do?'

'I told you – nothing for now.'

'The smartest thing would be to bring the cops in. They'll put a trace on Zane, probably pick him up within twenty-four hours.'

'Let me think about it.'

'While you're thinking about it, the other two women could be in danger.'

'I'll make a decision. In the meantime, is there any way you can place security around Jordanna Levitt and Cheryl Landers?'

'You mean bodyguards?'

'That's too extreme. I wouldn't want to alarm them. Maybe they can be watched from a distance without them knowing.'

'Jordanna Levitt, isn't she Bobby Rush's PA?'

'Yes. How do you know?'

'She's staying with Marjory Sanderson, and I happen to be working on a case for Marjory's father, so I can easily watch her. Quincy's back tomorrow, he'll take care of Cheryl Landers. All we need is her address.'

He put the phone down on Mac, still feeling uneasy. If he had a choice he'd go straight to the cops, but he had to talk this out with Quincy before doing anything.

It was a bitch of a situation, and he didn't have an answer.

☆ ☆ ☆

In the room next to the library Marjory listened on the extension until she heard Michael hang up. Then she hurriedly replaced the receiver.

What was going on? The man on the other end of the phone had sounded worried. And who was Zane?

She felt excited - part of something. If only Michael would confide in her.

The annoying thing was that Jordanna was involved in some way, and that Michael had to protect her. At least that meant he'd stay around more.

Growing up with Jordanna and Cheryl, Marjory had always felt like the outsider. She knew she was pale and insignificant compared to them - almost like their mascot - and even though they'd included her in everything, along with Grant and Shep, she'd always been the invisible one.

If only she could grab a good-looking man like Michael, wouldn't that show them all?

Of course, he was only a detective, and her father would object strongly, but so what? She was over twenty-one, she could do what she liked.

She exited the room, catching Michael on his way to the front door.

'I gotta go,' he said. 'I'm late for the studio.'

'What studio?'

'I'm on TV tonight.'

'Doing what?'

'My four-year-old daughter is missing. I'm making another appeal.'

He had a daughter! Did that mean he was married? She'd checked his wedding finger and there was no band.

'I . . . I didn't know, Michael. I'm so sorry. Will your wife be appearing with you?'

'My wife is dead.'

'Oh.' A brief pause. 'Would you like *me* to come with you?'

'That's OK,' he said, consulting his watch. He was running late and Rosa had particularly asked him to be on time. 'When will Jordanna be home?' he asked as he reached the front door.

'They might be working late again.'

'Well, uh . . . maybe I will spend the night. I'll be back when I finish at the studio.'

'I'd like that, Michael,' she said, lightly touching his arm. 'What's your favourite food?'

He backed off. 'Huh?'

'I want to cook for you.'

'No way, Marjory. Pizza'll be fine.'

'I'll send out to Spago.'

'Where?'

'Don't worry, you'll love it.'

Michael made it to the TV station in time. A production assistant met him at the door and rushed him into make-up.

'I can't stand all this crap,' he complained, sitting reluctantly in front of the mirror as the make-up woman went to work.

Just a touch of powder to take away the shine,' she insisted, dabbing away. 'We'll soon be done.'

Being in the studio was nerve-racking. The last time Rosa had done the interview at his apartment and it had been less stressful.

'We have a busy programme tonight,' the production assistant said. 'Kennedy Chase is appearing again. Do you know her?'

The name sounded vaguely familiar. 'No. Who is she?'
'A journalist. She's doing a piece on the LA strangler. Our station is trying to alert the Chief of Police to form a task

force, really?'

'There's been a series of these murders in LA over the last couple of months. Kennedy will be on any minute. Come to the Green Room and watch her.'

The girl led him into the Green Room where he grabbed a cup of coffee in a styrofoam cup, and sat down in front of the TV set. Rosa was on camera finishing up a report on a small plane crash. When she was done she turned to her co-anchor - a smooth-looking black man. They exchanged a few words, and then he proceeded to do a story on an armed robbery in Orange County. As soon as he was finished the camera zoomed back to Rosa, who flashed her best professional smile and began to speak. 'Last week, journalist Kennedy Chase talked about the murders of several women in Los Angeles over the past two months. I am sad to report that since then the police have taken no emergency action. Recently another woman met her death at the hands of this sadistic strangler. We are all at risk. Kennedy, over to you.'

The camera switched from Rosa to Kennedy. Michael's interest was immediately aroused.

Kennedy stared gravely into the camera and began

Speak. 'Good evening,' she said. 'Or is it?' A short but meaningful pause. 'How many more women are going to lose their lives before the Chief of Police and the Mayor decide to act? How many more female victims will be murdered before the conclusion is reached that what we have here is a serious state of emergency?'

Michael found he couldn't take his eyes off her. She was appealing and articulate. She was also incredibly attractive.

Was this the woman Rosa had tried to fix him up with? At the time he'd said no, but she sure had his attention now.

Kennedy continued to speak eloquently. She seemed to know plenty about the murders, maybe it wouldn't take long before she discovered that seven years ago they'd all worked on the same movie - Mac's movie. And that a killer had walked amongst them.

Before she was finished, the sound woman bustled into the Green Room and began hooking him up to a microphone. He stood up as she fitted the power pack on to the back of his belt.

'Not nervous, are you?' the sound woman asked.

'No, this is the second time for me.'

'I saw your first interview, it was quite touching.'

'Thanks,' he said, breathing deeply, preparing himself for his on-camera appearance.

Whenever he thought about Bella he felt depressed and helpless. He had to face the fact it was possible she could be dead, or involved in child pornography. Both thoughts made him go cold inside.

As he was leaving the Green Room he bumped into Kennedy coming from the studio.

'That was a very effective speech,' he said, stopping to speak to her.

'Thank you,' she replied, barely glancing in his direction.

'I'm Michael Scorsini.'

'Nice to meet you, Michael,' she said, turning to talk to one of the associate producers.

He was used to a more positive reaction from women, but she seemed distracted, in a hurry.

I think Rosa might have mentioned
determined to attract her attention. 'She tried to see
a date.'

Kennedy turned back to him with an amused expression.
'Ah, Rosa and her set-ups. She's always trying to fix me up,
and I'm *always* saying no. Did she do the same to you?'

He scratched his chin. 'Yeah, as a matter of fact she did.'
'Hmm . . . Rosa has a dating obsession — take no notice.'
'I didn't. But now that we've met, I *would* like to discuss
the murders with you.'

Finally he had her attention. 'Do you have information?'
she asked, regarding him with serious green eyes.

'I used to be a detective in New York. Worked a couple of
serial killer cases over the years. Maybe we can have a drink
later and talk about it.'

'I'm on my way home.'

'Another time?'

'If you have anything to add — yes. Rosa has my number.'

'OK, Michael, it's show time,' said his production assist-
ant. 'They're waiting.'

'I'll get your number from Rosa,' he said, allowing himself
to be led away. 'And I'll call you — soon.'

She nodded and watched as he was escorted down the
corridor. For once Rosa was right, Michael Scorsini was a
great-looking guy. But she was not in the market for great-
looking guys. She was not in the market for anybody.

All the same, she found herself lingering in the Green
Room waiting to watch his interview.

He came across as sincere and sympathetic. Once she
heard his story she felt genuinely sorry for him. What a
nightmare situation not knowing where your child was.

When he came back to the Green Room she was still
there. 'Changed my mind,' she said casually. 'I think I will
have a drink.'

He smiled ruefully. 'Feeling sorry for me, huh?'

Her eyes met his. 'Exactly.'

'Is there a Michael Scorsini here?' somebody yelled from
one of the offices.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

☆

They sat in a bar across the street from the TV station. Kennedy sipped a vodka martini and Michael had his usual non-alcoholic beer in front of him, although right now he yearned for something stronger.

'I'm not the greatest company in the world tonight,' he admitted, rubbing his stubbled chin, thinking to himself that he was incredibly attracted to this woman. It wasn't so surprising - she was coolly beautiful, with a subtle sex

'You don't have to be,' Kennedy said, wondering why she felt so drawn to this man she hardly knew. Was she merely sorry for him? Or was there a genuine attraction? 'If I were in your position I'd be insane by now.'

'It's the not knowing that's such a bitch. I think of Bella all the time. It's like a constant ache. I think about where she is, what she's doing, or even worse, if she's dead. Because if she is, it would almost be better knowing.'

'The strain must be unbearable.'

'It is. No leads. Nothing on who killed my ex-wife and her boyfriend. I call the detectives working the case every day - they're understanding, but they've got nothing to go on. And then I get a call like this, and I imagine I hear her voice . . .'

Impulsively Kennedy placed her hand over his. 'You can

be sure it was her on the phone. It could be somebody trying to get money out of you.'

'Yeah, fine chance! Where would I come up with ten thousand bucks?'

'I don't know what to say, Michael.'

'Hey,' he paused. 'It's enough that we're here talking. It makes a difference. Quincy, my partner, he's away right now.' Another pause. 'Besides, you're great to talk to.'

She moved her hand away and smiled. 'I missed my vocation. Maybe I should have been a bartender.' She picked up her drink and sipped it slowly. 'Where's your family, Michael?'

'New York. I got one brother – a real loser. And my mother has problems of her own.'

'How about your father?'

'He took off when I was a kid. My stepfather brought me up. Eddie Kowlinski – a real jewel of an asshole.'

'Do you see them often?'

He laughed drily. 'Not if I can help it.'

'Hardly *Little House on the Prairie*, huh?'

'Hey, you're pretty good at this.'

'What?'

'Asking questions. Getting things out of me.'

'It's my job.'

'Do you mind if I smoke?'

'As long as you don't blow it in my face.'

He lit a cigarette and squinted. 'I noticed your ring. You married, Kennedy?'

'My husband died,' she said quietly.

'I'm sorry.'

'He was a great guy.'

'If he was married to you I bet he was,' he said, regarding her seriously for a moment. 'So here we are, sitting in a bar, and the funny thing is I don't even drink.'

'Never?'

'I used to be a crazy man. AA saved me. I've been dry for several years now.'

'Me, I'm a social drinker,' she said. 'If there's a glass of
ine I'll drink it - if it's not around I don't miss it.'
'You're lucky. One drink puts me over the edge.'
'I'm glad you're not over the edge, Michael.'
'And I'm glad we're sitting here having a drink together.'
She smiled. 'Wouldn't Rosa be surprised?'

He smiled back. 'It's hardly a date, but I guess she'd be
pleased, huh?'

'Esteriel! Let's not tell her.'

'You got it.'

He took a pull on his cigarette. 'So, how did you get
involved in this murder investigation?'

'I was deciding what to write for the magazine I work for.
My father was sick, and a woman was murdered near the
hospital. One of the things my father said to me before he
died was, "Why don't you write about ordinary people
instead of the rich and famous?" And you know something,
he was right. So I started to investigate the first murder, and
discovered there were others that might be connected. The
police weren't interested, so Rosa talked me into appearing
on TV to see if we could light a fire.'

'She's good at that.'

'You mentioned you worked on a couple of serial killer
cases in New York. What do you make of this one?'

What was he supposed to say? That he knew who was
committing the murders. That right now he couldn't do
anything about it. Jeer, she'd really respect him for that.

'To tell you the truth, I haven't been following it,' he said,
avoiding her eyes.

'Maybe you should. I'd appreciate your input.'

He waved for the cheque. 'Y'know, it's late. I gotta go.
I'm working on a case. There's this rich girl who's being
stalked . . .'

'Really? Sounds like another story for me.'

'I'll let you know.'

'Do that, Michael.'

'How about we try this again?'

She laughed wryly. 'What - tell each other our troubles?'

'I could buy you dinner tomorrow night.'

'I'm busy tomorrow.'

'Then can I call you?'

She looked at him very directly. 'I think I'd like that.'



Bobby awoke Tuesday morning regretting that he'd agreed to have lunch with Barbara Barr.

When he'd arrived home from location the night before, she'd been waiting in his bed, incense burning, a mound of caviar piled in a glass dish, and a matching mound of cocaine on the bedside table.

He'd been furious. 'How did you get into my house?' he'd demanded angrily.

'I broke in,' she'd giggled, jumping out of bed stark-naked and throwing her arms around him. 'I knew you'd be hungry so I brought you caviar. It's a gift from me to you. So's the coke.'

'I don't do drugs, Barbara,' he'd said, trying to extract himself from her clinging embrace.

'You don't? Why not?'

'Cause it screws up your head. So put on your clothes, take your coke and get out of my house.'

'Sorry,' she'd said, with a sarcastic twist to her mouth. 'I didn't realize I was dealing with Mister Clean.'

'I don't appreciate your breaking in, Barbara.'

Her eyes had glittered dangerously. 'I could suck you off, Bobby. Or I could fuck you good. How about it?'

The way she'd said it scared him. There was something way off about Ms Barbara Barr.

'We'll have lunch tomorrow and talk,' he'd said, trying to stay calm. 'Right now I'm going to sleep.'

Somehow he'd managed to get her out of his house and into her car.

Now he was on his way to lunch, and because she was about to star in his movie he was caught in a trap. He'd had Beth check her out and she'd come up with a pile of lurid

headlines from the tabloids. Bobby felt foolish, he should have known that Barbara Barr was trouble about to happen.

Over lunch she regaled him with stories of her exploits. 'I've got this reputation for being out of my head,' she said, with an uncontrollable giggle. 'Queen of the rags! I don't know why. If somebody insults me like this tramp did the other night outside a club, I smash 'em in the face. Wouldn't you?'

'No, Barbara, that's how you get sued.'

'Nobody's going to sue me, I can assure you of that,' she said boldly. 'I have two brothers who'll break their fucking balls one at a time.'

Oh, shit!

'Can we have dinner tonight?' she asked, playing with a silver crucifix hanging around her neck on a long black cord.

'No.'

She crinkled her forehead. 'What do you mean, no?'

'It's not a good idea.'

'Why not?' she demanded, pouting.

'Barbara, back off.'

'Back off?' she said, her voice rising. 'Back off? What with you, Bobby? I'm not the kind of girl you can fuck and then run. You'd better remember that.'

'I didn't say you were.'

'Good.' Her eyes glittered dangerously. 'As long as we understand each other.'

After lunch he couldn't wait to get away. He knew that casting her as Sienna was a grave mistake, and there was only one answer.

He had to figure out a way to get them out of the commitment and Barbara off the movie before it was too late.

☆ ☆ ☆

Luca Carlotti flew to California with two of his henchmen Reno Luchessi and Bosco (the Pig) Nanni. Both good guys. Both men he could trust.

Trust and loyalty meant everything to Luca. As far as he was concerned, without trust and loyalty you were deader than a dog in a ditch.

Reno Luchessi was Luca's prince-in-waiting. At thirty-nine, Reno was tall and manly looking, with light brown hair that fell casually on to his forehead, long sweeping eyelashes and an innocent expression. His expression belied his true personality.

Reno was a killer – there was nothing he liked better than beating a man to death.

Bosco (the Pig) Nanni was a short, rotund man with pop eyes, hairy hands and no chin. He was nicknamed the Pig because of his excesses with women. Bosco could never get enough pussy, and because of his less than perfect appearance he tried harder in bed. It worked every time. Most of the women he slept with claimed he was the best lover they'd ever had.

They made an odd trio, but as far as Luca was concerned the three of them were totally compatible.

The flight to Los Angeles was uneventful, although Bosco managed to screw one of the stewardesses in the cramped toilet. 'Whaddaya want from me?' he shrugged, returning to his seat with a sly smile. 'She's a neighbourhood girl. I owed her a favour.'

They arrived shortly before noon on Tuesday. A limousine and hand-picked driver met them at the airport and drove them directly to the St James's Hotel, where Luca had arranged three separate suites.

As soon as Luca was settled he requested a manicure, a pedicure and a massage. It wasn't until he'd had all three that he called Mac, reaching him at home. 'I suggest we meet,' he said. 'It's been too long. Drop by the hotel.'

'If you think it's necessary,' Mac replied stiffly.

Luca was not happy with his response. 'We agreed you was gonna live your life,' he said. 'But sometimes – I gotta tell you – your attitude surprises me.'

'I'm not a kid, Luca,' Mac said hotly, feeling like one. 'Don't speak to me like I'm a goddamn kid.'

'Be here at four o'clock.'
Bosco was already on the line in the living suite, busy finding out where the action was. 'LA's got the best-looking hookers in the world,' he informed Luca. 'Better than Vegas.'

'Vegas hookers are shit,' Luca commented, inspecting his manicure. 'They got no class.'

'Not in my opinion,' Bosco answered, ready for a lengthy discussion. 'I almost married a Vegas dancer once. She gave the greatest head I ever had.'

'You wouldn't know a good hooker if she sat on your face,' Reno snickered, picking up a handful of nuts and tossing them in his mouth one by one.

Bosco threw him a disgusted look.
'He - I've *never* had to pay for it,' Reno boasted, brushing a crease in his pants. He aspired to be as sartorial as Luca, didn't quite cut it.

Then you don't know what you're missin',' Bosco said, with a wink in Luca's direction. 'You get a classy lookin' broad, pay her to do whatever you want, an' the best thing is she don't give you no grief. You don't even havta buy her nothin', not even dinner, not even a friggin' drink! She just sucks the shit outta you an' goes home.'

Reno shook his head. 'I've never paid for it,' he repeated. 'Never have. Never will. Never needed to.'

Luca started to laugh. Reno and Bosco were about as opposite as two people could get. Watching them together was like having his own entertainment channel.

'I found out there's a new place runnin' the best call girls in town,' Bosco announced. 'Primo pussy. You want I should order one for you, Luca?'

Luca considered the question. If he was going to deal with Zane he would certainly feel horny. Violence always made him horny. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Why not? Get me a short one, big tits, red hair and a nurse's uniform.'

'A nurse's uniform?' Reno said. 'What're you - sick?'

'Didn't I tell you about the time I was in the hospital when I was sixteen?' Luca said. 'Some crazy bastard busted

my leg with a baseball bat. There was this nurse took care of me - a real looker - gave head like she was suckin' the chrome off a 1969 Cadillac! Yeah, get me a fuckin' nurse.'

They all laughed.

☆ ☆ ☆

Sitting out by the pool reading *Variety*, Jordanna stopped at Army Archerd's column because she spotted Jordan's name. She read the few lines quickly and her heart jumped.

Friends of Jordan Levitt's will be pleased to know the abdominal pains he suffered recently were nothing serious, and after an over-nighter in Cedar's he's now home.

She read it twice, furious that no one had called her. Then she realized how could they? Neither Jordan nor Kim knew where she was.

The time had come to make her peace. What if anything had happened to him?

Since she'd moved out of Charlie's and started working she felt pretty good about herself. Good enough to forget about her differences with Kim and make peace. Yes, she decided, it was definitely time to resolve matters with Jordan - time to let go. Whatever Jordan had done in the past, it was *his* life and now she'd finally realized it. So Kim used to be a call girl. Big deal. At least she was making Jordan happy. Maybe that's all that counted.

She drove over to her father's house, zooming her Porsche up the driveway. She knew he was home because his Bentley was parked outside.

Jumping out of her car she ran up to the front door. 'Hi,' she said to the Filipino houseman who let her in. 'Is my father around?'

'He's in his study, Miss Levitt,' the man said.

'Thanks,' she said, entering the house and heading for Jordan's study. 'Surprise!' she exclaimed, flinging open the door.

He glanced up from behind his desk. 'Where the hell have you been?' he said gruffly.

She wrinkled her nose. 'That's a nice greeting. And I thought you were supposed to be sick.'

'I'm serious, Jordanna,' he said sternly. 'Where have you been? Don't you think I worry about you? You take your things, run out of here leaving no forwarding address. I don't appreciate that kind of thoughtless behaviour.'

'I'm not a little girl, Daddy.'

'You behave like one.'

Oh, God, were they destined to fight straight off?

'Look,' she said sensibly. 'I came here today because I wanted to tell you that I have a job, I'm looking for an apartment, and I don't need your money any more - I'm making it on my own. I hoped you'd be proud of me.'

He continued to frown.

'Are you proud of me?' she persisted.

'I've heard all kinds of rumours,' he grumbled. 'I even heard you were living with Charlie Dollar, but I knew that couldn't be true, he's the same age as me for chrissakes.'

'Of course I'm not living with him,' she said, adding silent 'Any more.'

He stood up. 'At least I'm relieved.'

'So am I!' she said. 'I read you were in the hospital.'

'Gas.'

'Charming!'

'One fart and they let me out.'

'You're disgusting!'

'Merely truthful, my dear.'

She giggled. 'Anyway,' she said warmly. 'I came to congratulate you - I heard about the baby.'

'Who told you?'

'Kim did when I collected my things. I'm really happy for both of you.'

He was waiting for the catch.

There wasn't one.

'Do you need a cheque?' he asked suspiciously.

'No, I told you, I have a job. And I'm not writing a book.'

I'm working on Mac Brooks's new movie as assistant to Bobby Rush. I'm learning about the business — just like you always told me I should. Hey, maybe one day I'll even be a producer like you.'

Jordanna, are you sure you're feeling all right?'

'You know what, Daddy? I've never felt so good. I think it's because I've finally found out being independent works for me.'

He held open his arms. 'Come here, skinny bird.'

'Don't *call* me that,' she said, not really cross at all.

'Come *over* here.'

She walked up to him and he wrapped her in a big hug. 'I've missed you,' he said, holding her close.

'I've missed you, too,' she replied, feeling a rush of emotion. 'I was so worried when I read you were in the hospital.'

At that moment a breathless Kim entered the room, 'What's going on?' she asked in a strained voice.

'We're having a father/daughter reunion,' Jordan said, beaming.

'Hi, Kim,' Jordanna said in full friendly mode. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine,' Kim said uneasily, waiting for her to ruin everything.

'I'm glad to hear that.'

'So here we are,' Jordan said, unaware of the tension. 'All my girls together. This is wonderful. We should go out and have a celebration lunch.'

Kim chewed on her bottom lip. 'Can we call it a celebration?' she said, staring meaningfully at Jordanna.

'Yes, Kim,' Jordanna said quietly. 'We certainly can.'



'Nice of you to make it back,' Michael said, greeting Quincy at the door.

'Can you believe it?' Amber said, lugging the baby inside.

skirt. I *told* him he was a lousy skier. But did he listen? Oh no, Mister Big Sports Star Robbins just says, what you worryin' 'bout, baby? An' then promptly skis into a tree!

Quincy managed to look sheepish. 'I didn't *see* that tree, honey. It came outta nowhere.'

'Don't you honey me!' she scolded. 'I'm putting the kids down for a nap, and I am *not* cooking dinner tonight, so don't you be expecting any.'

'I'm a wounded man,' Quincy said plaintively. 'I need sympathy an' lovin' care.'

'Get it from Michael, 'cause *this* store is closed.' She vanished upstairs with the children.

'Ain't marriage grand,' Quincy sighed, walking into the living room and flopping down on the couch.

'Seems like she's pissed,' Michael said.

'Dunno why - I'm the one with the broken arm.'

'OK,' Michael said. 'Let's get serious. There's been plenty going on while you've been away.'

'There has? Why didn't you call?'

'Cause I figured it could hold until you got back.'

'Do me a favour, get me a beer from the kitchen.'

'How long you gonna be in the cast?'

'The doc said six weeks.'

'Jeez!'

'I know.'

Michael went into the kitchen and grabbed a can of beer from the fridge. He couldn't stop thinking about Kennedy. He'd never met a woman like her before, she seemed so different. Beautiful *and* smart - a killer combination. He was looking forward to seeing her again.

'Where's my beer?' Quincy yelled.

'Coming.'

He took Quincy his beer, sat next to him on the couch and began filling him in.

☆ ☆ ☆

After lunch Bobby drove over to the screening room at the studio just in time to view the dailies with Mac. He turned to Mac when the lights went up expecting praise. Instead, Mac glanced at his watch and muttered a fast, 'I've got to go.'

'What did you think of the scenes we just saw?' Bobby asked.

'They're good. Cedric Farrell's giving a fine performance as your father. He's a real pro.'

Just what an actor longed to hear — praise for another actor. Bobby couldn't help feeling hurt, he needed praise too.

'We have to talk,' he said. 'There's a major problem about to happen.'

Mac looked at him sharply. Did Bobby know? How could that be? 'Later,' he said, halfway out the door. 'I have a meeting.'

'This is important, Mac.'

'So's my meeting.'

'Then you'd better come by the production office later.'

'I'll try,' Mac said, running out of there like he had a rocket up his ass.

Bobby hurried across the lot to the office, where the first person he ran into was Stan, now working in the Accounts Department.

'Bobby!' Stan exclaimed happily. Since scoring a job he'd cheered up considerably.

'Hey, Stan, how's it going?' Bobby said, hoping he wasn't about to be trapped.

'Couldn't be better,' Stan replied. 'Everything's under control.'

'Good,' Bobby said. 'Let's keep it that way.'

Stan was still around, but Len had gotten canned after the first week because he'd come to work drunk three days in a row. Len's wife, Trixie, had been trying to reach Bobby to complain about the firing, but so far he'd managed to avoid her calls.

Bobby made a fast escape upstairs to his office, he simply wasn't comfortable around Stan.

Beth greeted him with downcast eyes. 'I have really bad news, Bobby.'

'What?'

'Cedric Farrell's wife just called. He had a heart attack.'

'Oh, Jesus! Is he at Cedar's?'

'No,' Beth said quietly. 'He died an hour ago.'

'God, that's terrible.'

'I know.'

'How old was he?'

'Seventy-two.'

'Can we do anything?'

'His wife said she'll let us know the arrangements.'

It was shocking news. One moment Cedric was walking around perfectly healthy, and the next gone. He couldn't believe it.

When the news sank in he began to realize they were in a crisis situation. Cedric had been in almost every frame for the last two days, now they'd have to recast and reshoot. This would put them behind schedule and over budget.

'Try and get hold of Mac,' he said, thinking fast. 'We'll need him. And call Nanette Lipsky pronto. Get everyone up here as soon as possible.'

Beth couldn't reach Mac since he'd failed to leave a number, but she did manage to locate everyone else.

They gathered for an emergency meeting, Nanette and Florrie, Gary, Tyrone and several of the production staff. They sat around the office trying to come up with a solution.

'I got it, Bobby,' Nanette Lipsky said at last, flicking thick cigarette ash on the floor. 'It's a helluva idea, but knowing you, you'll probably spit in my face.'

'Let's hear it,' Bobby said. 'I'll try not to spit too hard.'

Nanette took another long pull on her cigarette, inhaled deeply and said, 'Your old man.'

'My old man?' he repeated blankly.

'Jerry Rush. He's your father in real life - what could be better?'

'Jesus!' Bobby said, slapping his forehead. 'Don't even suggest it.'

Nanette's expression was inscrutable. 'You want to spit now or later?'

But the seed was planted. And Bobby knew in his heart that Jerry would be perfect for the role.

Somehow or other Jerry's name slipped out of the room and reached the studio honchos. One of them called to offer his congratulations. 'Bobby, this is the best piece of stunt casting I've heard in a long time. Will Jerry do it?'

'We haven't made a decision,' Bobby said edgily. 'I'll have to talk to Mac, he's unreachable right now.' And then he came up with a brilliant idea. 'Tell you what,' he added. 'If I hire Jerry Rush to play my father, can we work out a way to pay off Barbara Barr? I feel strongly that she's not right for the role, we made a bad choice. Plus I got this strong hunch she'll cause us nothing but trouble.'

'You saw the story in the tabloids, too, huh?'

'What story?'

'Apparently she had a fight with a girl outside a club, and now the girl is suing her for ten million bucks.'

'I'm telling you, if we can pay her off and come out of this clean, we'll be better off.'

'So we'll cut a deal, Bobby. You get us Jerry and we'll let you go with who you want for Sienna.'

'Sounds good to me.'



The Man had been busy. Tracking Cheryl Landers was no mean feat.

First he'd visited the address he had for her in Bel Air. He'd watched and waited for two days, but there was no sighting of her.

On the third day she'd appeared at lunch time driving a silver BMW. Shortly after arriving she left again – this time with a woman who looked like it could be her mother in the passenger seat of the car.

He followed them to The Bistro Gardens on Canon where they had lunch.

When they were through there they went shopping. He trailed them to Sak's and Magnin's. Rich women idling away the afternoon – how he loathed them both.

Eventually Cheryl drove back to the Bel Air house, where she dropped off her mother, and drove away, heading back to Beverly Hills.

The Man was right behind her.

She stopped at Thrifty's on Canon Drive. He parked his car and followed her into the large drugstore – eyes covered by his black-out Armani shades, hair neatly scraped back in a ponytail.

Cheryl would never recognize him. Even if they came face to face in one of the aisles she would not know who he was.

He liked that. It made him feel powerful. He knew who she was, and yet he was able to remain totally anonymous.

Taking a basket he filled it with a few items as he trailed Cheryl around the store.

She wheeled a cart, throwing in boxes of Kleenex, packets of candy, a whole bunch of magazines, cartons of cigarettes, condoms and several cans of bug spray.

Then she went over to the liquor section, where she filled the cart with three giant bottles of margarita mix and two bottles of tequila.

He stood in the check-out line behind her and observed as she paid with a gold credit card. Then he followed her out to the parking lot where he watched her load her car.

Go home, bitch! he thought to himself. Go home so I can find out where you live.

When she set off he was right behind her as she drove up Benedict Canyon, turning on Beverly Grove Park Road.

She drove up into the hills and turned into a private driveway. He parked and waited a few minutes, then he left his car and scurried up the driveway on foot. He was in time to see Cheryl at the front door of a country-style house, unloading her shopping bags, being helped by a Mexican maid.

Now he knew where she lived.

Plans. He had to make plans. Because it was not going to be so easy for Cheryl Landers. She would suffer before the final cleansing – just as he had suffered in jail.

Soon he'd have to move out of the house. The last cheque he'd received from one of Luca's companies had been for six thousand dollars. He'd carefully changed the amount to sixty thousand and deposited it in an account he'd opened with a phoney name. Over the next few days he'd withdrawn the cash. Once his uncle found out about the cheque he'd be after him.

He'd already started making preparations for the future. A week ago he'd purchased several guns – one of them an Uzi automatic – and a good supply of bullets. Now he had money and weapons. It made him feel invincible. Nobody could touch him ever again.

Driving back to the house he was suddenly overcome with bad vibrations. Something was amiss. In prison he'd developed an antenna for trouble, it never let him down.

Before entering the driveway he parked on the street, and once more made his way carefully up the driveway on foot, staying near the shrubbery.

Parked outside the entrance to the house was a long black limousine. Leaning against it, puffing on a fat cigar, was Bosco Nanni — one of his uncle's associates.

The Man felt a shiver of fear. Did this mean that Uncle Luca was somewhere in the vicinity?

Had he found out about the cheque?

It was more than likely.

The Man edged back down the driveway until he reached the safety of his car. Then he drove a block away and parked, keeping the entrance to the house in sight.

He was mad at himself. He should have moved days ago. Bad timing on his part.

He'd wait until they left, collect his things, and never come back. He could outsmart his uncle any day. Where to go, that was the question. He pondered, thinking hard. Several days ago he'd found a note from Shelley stuck on his door. She'd written that she'd moved, and would love him to come and see her one day.

He'd included her new address.

He'd stuffed the piece of paper in his shirt pocket, thinking nothing of it. Now he removed the note and read it through again.

Shelley was about to have a visitor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Michael filled Quincy in and got his input. Once Quincy heard the Mac Brooks story he wanted immediate action. 'We have to do something about those other two witnesses,' he said.

Michael agreed with him.

'You can watch the Levitt girl,' Quincy said. 'I'll keep an eye out for Cheryl Landers.'

'How'll you do that?' Michael asked, shaking loose a cigarette. 'In case you've forgotten, your arm's in a cast.'

'I can handle it,' Quincy said. 'I'll drive over to her house and sit in the car outside. Tomorrow I'll put a guy on it.'

Michael lit up and took a drag. 'What if anything came down?'

'Relax. It's my left arm – besides, I'm carryin'. And put that cigarette out, you know Amber doesn't allow it.'

Michael took another drag and searched for an ashtray. 'The smart move would be to alert the detectives working this case,' he said.

'No way,' Quincy said sharply. 'A private investigator has a privileged relationship with his clients, the same kind of confidentiality a psychiatrist has with their patients. We can't break it. The business wouldn't be worth shit if we did.'

'So we gotta sit back and let this go on?'

'If what you tell me about Kennedy Chase is true the cops'll figure it out soon enough. They'll break the case without our help.'

'I hope so.'

'In the meantime, take my beeper, give the number to Marjory and the Levitt girl. Tell her she might need to reach you on account of Marjory.'

Michael headed back to the Sanderson mansion. Marjory was thrilled to see him, as soon as he walked through the door she presented him with a gift-wrapped package.

'What's this?' he asked uncomfortably.

'A small present for taking such good care of me.'

He frowned. 'I can't accept it, Marjory.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm getting *paid* to take care of you.'

'I know. But I can do something nice, can't I?'

He opened up the package. It was a special present: a set of the *Godfather* movies. 'That's very thoughtful,' he said warily. 'But I told you, I can't accept it.'

'Yes, you can,' she insisted. 'And tonight I hope you'll have dinner with me.'

He thought about Kennedy, she'd said she was busy, but he decided he'd call her anyway. 'What time will Jordanna be back?' he asked, switching subjects, not even acknowledging her dinner invitation.

'You're always asking me about Jordanna,' she said snippily.

'Since she's staying here I've gotta know her movements,' he explained.

'I have no idea, and quite frankly I don't care.'

'Are they working today?'

'I'm not the production office.'

She was a big help. 'You know what, I'll be back later,' he said, and much to her annoyance, took off.

☆ ☆ ☆

Luca had not visited the house he owned in California for many years. He'd originally bought it twenty-five years ago as a secret hideaway for a Hollywood actress, who, at the

time, was his West Coast mistress. She'd lived there until he'd flown in unexpectedly one day and discovered her in bed with a brawny stuntman. First he'd had them both beaten up, then he'd had them thrown out.

After that the house stood empty for a while, until a friend who was going to LA asked if he could use a room there. Luca said yes. Then the friend asked if another acquaintance could take up residence. Luca agreed. And somehow, over the years, it had become a crash pad for friends and acquaintances.

Luca had always intended to do something about the big empty house, but he'd never gotten around to it. And when Zane came out of prison it seemed to be the perfect place to stash him.

When Luca entered the grounds he frightened the shit out of the old Japanese gardener, who leaped to attention. 'Mr Carlotti,' the gardener exclaimed, eyes bugging with surprise. 'You remember me?'

Luca stared at the weathered old man whom he could swear he'd never set eyes on before. 'Yeah, yeah,' he said cordially – always be nice to the little people, you never knew when you might need them. 'It's Juan . . . or Chico . . . right?'

'Tikyo, Mr Carlotti,' the gardener said, beaming through his wrinkles, thrilled that the owner of the big house was actually paying a visit.

'Yeah, sure it is. I'm gonna take a look around, Taki, check out you bin doin' a good job.'

The old gardener's head bobbed up and down. 'I do the best for you, Mr Carlotti. Always.'

'Glad to hear it, Toko. How many people we got livin' here now?'

'Only one, Mr Carlotti. There was a young lady staying, but she left a few days ago.'

'Only one, huh?' His voice hardened. 'Where is he?'

The gardener pointed at the house. 'In the back room.'

Luca nodded and entered the house, Reno close behind him.

want me to take him out soon as we see the ph
ked, impatiently cracking his knuckles.
not here,' Luca replied. 'Not in my house. We'll take
a ride.'
l he give us trouble?' Reno asked, always hopeful.
chance,' Luca replied confidently. 'Cause I'm the one
' him money. I'm the one supporting the fucker.'
dessa approached, lugging an ancient vacuum cleaner
d her. She stopped as soon as she saw them.
Where's the guy that's livin' here?' Luca demanded.
he pointed to Zane's room a few feet away, her face
passive. 'It's locked,' she said. 'He don't allow nobody in
re.'

'You got a key?'
'No, sir.'

'This is my house,' Luca said. 'You know that, don't you?'
'You bin payin' me twenty-five years.'
He reached into his pocket and slipped her a hundred

dollar bill. 'I was never here today.'
'I din't see nobody,' she said, taking off, dragging t
vacuum behind her.

Luca turned to Reno. 'Break down the fuckin' door.'
Reno inspected the door. 'I need tools,' he said, scratching
his head. 'This is a heavy-duty lock.'

'Shit!' Luca said.

'If I have tools I can do it.'

Luca stomped down the hallway, found a side door, and
walked outside.

He peered into Zane's room from the garden. There were
iron bars on the window precluding entry.

'The cocksucker ain't home anyway,' he said, turning
around and strolling over to the swimming pool. He studied
his reflection in the cracked tile. 'This is a nice house,' he
remarked. 'It occurred t'me I gotta renovate it. Put it on the
market instead of it sittin' here empty.'

Reno nodded his agreement.

'Let's go,' Luca decided. 'We'll come back tomorrow. Th
prick ain't goin' nowhere.'

slipping him a hundred bucks as well. I wasn't there. I didn't see nothin', he said gruffly.

The old man nodded as he pocketed the money.

Luca got into his limousine. It was nice to have loyal employees.



Mac was reluctant to visit Luca. He hadn't seen him since his mother's funeral three years ago when he'd flown to New York. At that time he'd thought he'd never have to see him again.

He'd always been angry that Luca had never made an honest woman of his mother. The two of them had been together for so many years, and when Luca's wife had passed away ten years ago Mac had quite expected them to marry.

But no, they'd continued to maintain separate residences. Priscilla stayed in her Park Avenue penthouse, while Luca still resided in his Long Island mansion.

Mac had asked her about Luca once.

'Why would I marry him and spoil everything?' she'd said, as if it was the last thing she wanted.

His mother had been very beautiful, very remote, and completely loyal to Luca.

It pissed Mac off. Growing up, he'd never had her full attention.

The lobby of the St James's Hotel was art deco and rather stylish. It seemed a strange choice of hotel for Luca, but then he was always full of surprises. Mac hesitated, trying to figure out what he was doing there.

He had on his dark shades, but the woman behind the reception desk recognized him anyway. 'Good evening, Mr Brooks,' she said with a touch of deference reserved for famous film directors. 'And what can we do for you this afternoon?'

'I have a meeting with Mr Carlotti,' he mumbled, not happy she'd recognized him.

...lled Luca's room and pointed him towards the
'Mr Carlotti's in the penthouse suite. I certainly
your last film, Mr Brooks.'
...k you.'

...ook the elevator up.
...greeted him at the door looking as dashing as ever.
...ood to see ya,' he said, patting him on the shoulder as
...ntered the luxurious suite. 'How long's it been? Two
...Three?'

...y mother's funeral,' Mac replied dourly.
...h, yeah. Priscilla's funeral - may she rest among the
...s. She was some great lady.'
...hardly knew her, Mac wanted to say. She never had time
...me. It was always you. You were the centre of her
...verse. You were everything to her. Even my father was
...shed into second place.
'What'll you drink?' Luca asked, gesturing expansively
...wards the bar.

'Scotch on the rocks,' he said, feeling uncomfortable.
'Help yourself.'

He walked over and poured himself a healthy dose of
Scotch, adding several ice-cubes. 'You know, Luca,' he said,
... on the couch. 'It wasn't necessary for us to meet.'

Luca did not take offence. 'What, you didn't wanna meet
with me?' he said good-naturedly.
'We made a decision when I came to Hollywood that our
lives would be separate. I find this awkward.'

Some of Luca's good humour slipped away. 'Oh, you find
it awkward, huh?'

He was silent.

'You didn't find it so awkward when you called to tell me
about Zane.'

He took a gulp of Scotch. 'I told you because I felt I owed
it to you.' The ice-cubes in his glass jangled noisily.

'Don't give me that bullshit,' Luca snapped. 'You told me
'cause you don't want it gettin' out you're in any way
responsible for him bein' on your fuckin' movie.'

'I wasn't responsible,' Mac said sharply. 'You were.'

'You got a shitty attitude,' Luca said. 'An' I ain't too fond of it.'

Mac held on to his glass so tightly it almost shattered. He got up, walked over to the window and shrugged. 'If you don't like my attitude, I can always leave.'

'No, you can't fuckin' leave,' Luca said, his hooded eyes angry. 'Cause there's somethin' I gotta tell you. Somethin' I shoulda told you a long time ago – only your mother wouldn't let me.'

'What?'

'You ain't gonna like it. Or maybe you will.'

The room was full of the smell of Luca's potent aftershave, he hadn't changed it in twenty-five years. Mac found it brought back every bad memory of the day his father was gunned down. He remembered that fateful day so vividly. Luca had given him the bad news. Embracing him tightly he'd said, 'Kid, your old man's gone, but he's probably in a better place.'

And that had been that.

Ever since then, the smell of Luca's aftershave had made him queasy.

I am a grown man, he thought to himself. I am a world-renowned film director. I have won an Oscar. I don't need to sit in this room and be intimidated by the likes of Luca Carlotti.

'So,' Luca said. 'This is the deal, son.'

'Do me a favour,' he interrupted sharply. 'Don't call me son.' It was the first time he'd said it out loud and it felt good.

Luca adopted a pained expression. 'I always looked after you, didn't I?' he said. 'I always made sure you had the best.'

Mac nodded. He couldn't deny that Luca had done everything he could. Only sometimes everything wasn't enough.

'Whatever you asked for you got,' Luca continued, throwing his arms wide. 'Was there anythin' I didn't do for you?'

Including fuck my mother, Mac wanted to say, but he refrained from doing so.

'No, Luca, you were always good to me,' he said levelly. 'It's not that you weren't. But we moved on to different lives, and as the years have passed I've realized I can never forget that my father got shot with a bullet meant for you.'

Luca began pacing up and down. 'I understand,' he said. 'An' that's why it's about time you listened to the truth.'

'What truth?'

'There ain't no easy way t'say this,' Luca said, suddenly standing very still and staring at him. 'So I'll try an' give it t'you straight.' A long silent beat. 'Your old man was never your old man.' Another beat. 'I'm your real father.'

The glass shattered in Mac's hand, slicing into the soft skin between his thumb and forefinger. Ice-cubes and Scotch spilled on to his pants, along with a stream of blood.

Luca said nothing. He walked into the bathroom, returning with a towel.

Mac wrapped the towel around his wounded hand. He was stunned. 'I ... I ... don't believe you,' he finally stammered.

'I don't care whether you believe me or not,' Luca said, his smoothly suntanned face impassive. 'I hadda keep it to myself all these years outta respect for your mother. Y'know, Priscilla an' me, we was always in love, ever since we was kids.'

'Then why didn't you marry her?'

'Cause we had a dumb fight - an' didn't talk for a couple years. During that time I married a rich broad whose father helped finance me, put me into business so to speak. By the time Priscilla and I got back together, she was married, too. We made the best of a bad situation, I hired her husband - the man you thought was your father - an' the three of us started hangin' out. My wife was sickly, she stayed at home most of the time.' He took another long beat before continuing. 'When your mother got pregnant she hadn't slept with her husband in over a year. He wasn't into sex - not with her, anyway.'

'What does that mean?'

'You want I should spell it out? It means he was a fag. A pansy. A pretty boy.'

Mac was so shocked he could barely speak. 'Why are you telling me now?' he managed at last.

'Cause I'm a rich man, a powerful man. I got a sister dumber than shit. She's got a kid who's a murdering cock-sucker. An' the only real relative I got is you.' He sighed. 'I'm sixty-four years old, Mac. If anything happens to me, it's all yours.'

'I don't want it,' Mac said forcefully.

Luca's chuckle was totally humourless. 'Whether you want it or not, you got it, son. Oh yes, sircce, you got every single red cent.'



By the time she left her father and Kim, Jordanna felt really good about things. She finally understood him, and by understanding him she could accept him. It was all so easy.

She decided to drop by the production office and see what was going on before going home and preparing for her date with Tyrone.

At the office Florrie was running around looking frantic, carrying stacks of photographs under her arm.

'What's going on?' Jordanna asked. 'I thought we were off today.'

'Emergency meeting,' Florrie said, full of her own importance. 'Didn't you get a call?'

'No, I haven't been home. What happened?'

'Cedric Farrell died. He had a heart attack.'

'That's awful.'

'We have to find a replacement immediately.'

'Is everybody upstairs?'

'No, the meeting just finished. We're bringing in a couple of actors tomorrow morning, but the word is we might hire Bobby's father, Jerry.'

'Would Bobby go for that?'

'Dunno, but it'll be great PR for the movie.'
Jordanna ran upstairs and burst into Bobby's office. He was sitting behind his desk looking tired and drained. She stifled a strong desire to put her arms around him and hold him close. 'I'm sorry, Bobby,' she said softly. 'I only just heard.'

'Hey, it's one of those things.'

'Cedric was a sweetheart. Everyone liked him.'

'Yeah, we'll all miss him.'

'You look exhausted. Can I get you anything?'

He laughed drily. 'How about a new life?'

Smiling ruefully she said, 'I'm good at a lot of things, but a new life might present a problem.'

Drumming his fingers on the desk top, he said, 'You heard the news, I suppose. They want me to hire Jerry Rush.'

'Florrie mentioned it. Are you going to?'

'Don't want to, but I can see where it would work for the movie.'

She brushed back her long dark hair. 'What comes first, Bobby? Your feelings or the movie?'

He shook his head. 'You got me there.'

'Guess where I was?' she said.

'I'm not in the mood for guessing games.'

'I visited my dad. Made a peace pact.'

'You did, huh?'

'I read he was in the hospital - nothing serious, but it freaked me out, so I went to see him.' She paused for a moment. 'Y'know, Bobby, we've never discussed it, but we both grew up in Hollywood with famous powerful fathers, so I guess we shared a few problems. I decided to resolve mine.'

'And did you?'

'Today was the first time I've seen Jordan without wanting anything from him. God, it felt good!'

'Why are you telling me?'

'Because you should do the same.'

'I haven't wanted anything from my old man in a long time.'

'Are you sure? Think about it. Love. Acceptance. Respect. It doesn't all revolve around money.'

'You've been spending too much time at your therapist's.'

'I don't go to a shrink any more,' she said earnestly. 'I worked this out by myself. For years I was sitting in my father's guest house, not paying rent, collecting an allowance I thought I was entitled to. The result was I resented him. I thought everything he did reflected on me personally. Every time he got married I took it as a direct hit. But today I woke up and let go. He's him, I'm me. It's pretty damn simple. Now why are you so hung up about *your* dad?'

He looked at her quizzically. 'You got several weeks to discuss it?'

'Bobby,' she said fervently. 'I wish I could explain it. Your father is probably a pain in the ass, but he's nothing to do with you. You're a grown-up, you don't have to answer to him any more, you've proved yourself. And if it works for the movie – why *not* hire him?'

She was making sense, but he wasn't prepared to admit it. 'Ever thought about appearing on TV doing one of those inspirational programmes? You'd be a smash,' he said lightly.

She grinned. 'Thanks. I always wanted to be a life enhancer.'

'OK, so you've convinced me. I'll go see Jerry.'

'Want me to come with you?'

'You think I need the support?'

'Maybe.'

'It's a deal. If I find myself weakening I'll look to you for inspiration.'

'Whenever you're ready.'

He stood up. 'First I've got to reach Mac. I can't make this decision without him. There's also no guarantee Jerry will want to do it.'

'C'mon, Bobby, when was the last time he worked?'

'Jerry was a huge star.'

'Every star makes its descent. *You're* the huge star in the family now. Believe me, he'll be thrilled.'

were lovers, the only thing anyone knew for certain was that they were friends. Even Samantha had never been sure that there was more between them, though she and Barbara had suspected and often giggled, but they had never really known.

'How's Caroline, Bill?' She looked over at him with a warm smile and saw a special glow come to his eyes.

'Tough as ever. She's tougher than anyone on that ranch.' And older. She was three years older than he. She had been one of the most glamorous and elegant women in Hollywood in her twenties, married to one of the most important directors of her day. The parties they had given were still among the early legends, and the home they had built in the hills above Hollywood was still on some of the tours. It had changed hands often but was still a remarkable edifice, a monument to a bygone era rarely equalled in later years. But thirty-two Caroline Lord had been widowed, and after that, for her, life in Hollywood had never been the same again. She had stayed on for two more years, but it had been painful and lonely, and then suddenly without explanation she had disappeared. She had spent a year in Europe, and then another six months in New York. It took her another year after that to decide what she really wanted, but as she drove for hours, alone in her white Lincoln Continental, she suddenly knew where it was she longed to be. Out in the country, in nature, away from the champagne and the parties and the pretence. None of it had had any meaning for her after her husband was gone. All of that was over for her now. She was ready for something very different, a whole new life, a new adventure, and that spring, after looking at every available piece of property in a two-hundred mile radius of Los Angeles, she bought the ranch.

She paid a fortune for it, hired an advisor and the best ranch hands around. She paid everyone a handsome wage, built them pleasant, cosy quarters, and offered them a kind of warmth and comfort that few men could deny. And in return, she wanted sound

vice and good teaching, she wanted to learn how to run the ranch herself one day, and she expected them to work as hard as she did herself. It was in her first year at the ranch that Bill King found her, took the place in hand, and taught her all he knew himself. He was a foreman of the kind most ranchers would die for, and it was purely by accident that he landed on the Lord Ranch. And even more so that he and Caroline Lord wound up as lovers. All that Samantha knew of Bill's history on the ranch was that he had been there almost since the beginning and had helped make the place a financial success.

Theirs was one of the few California cattle ranches that showed a profit. They bred Angus cattle and sold a few Morgan horses as well. Most of the big ranches were in the Midwest or the Southwest; only a precious few in California had good luck, and many were kept in operation as tax losses by their owners—city dwellers, stockbrokers, lawyers, and movie stars who bought them as a kind of game. But the Lord Ranch was no game, not to Bill King or Caroline Lord, or to the men who worked there, and Samantha also knew that while she stayed there she would be expected to perform certain chores as well. No one came to the ranch just to be lazy. It seemed indecent, considering how hard everyone else worked.

When Sam had called Caroline this time, she had told Sam that at the moment they were short two men and Samantha was welcome to help out. It was going to be a busy vacation for Samantha, of that she was sure. She figured that most likely she would do small jobs in the stables, take care of some of the horses, and maybe help clean out some of the stalls. She knew just how unlikely it was that she would get a chance to do much more. Not that she wasn't able to. Samantha had long since proven her skill on a horse. A rider at five, in horse shows at seven, Madison Square Garden at twelve, and three blue ribbons and a red, jumping competitions thereafter, and a couple of years when she

cooked as though she were ~~an~~ g an army. It came from years of being surrounded by ranch hands and friends.

'Wouldn't that be a lot of trouble for you?' He looked hesitant, his big bulk suddenly seeming too large for the low ceilings, but Samantha quickly shook her head.

'Don't be silly. Caroline left enough food here for ten.' He laughed and followed her into the kitchen, and as they chatted about the ranch and the day's work, she set the table, and a few minutes later they were devouring the chicken and the salad as though they ate dinner together every day.

'What's New York like?' He looked at her, grinning, after he had finished his meal.

'Oh . . . crazy, I guess, is the best way to describe it. Too crowded, too noisy, too dirty, but exciting too. Everyone in New York seems to be doing something: going to the theatre, starting a business, rehearsing for a ballet, going broke, getting rich, getting famous. It really isn't a place for mere mortals.'

'And you?' He eyed her carefully as she got up to pour them both coffee.

'I used to think I loved it.' She shrugged as she set down the cups of steaming coffee and sat down again. 'Now sometimes I'm not so sure. It all seems terribly far away right now, and not very important. It's funny, three weeks ago I couldn't have left my office to get a haircut without calling three times in an hour just to make sure everything was okay. And now I've been gone for almost three weeks and who knows the difference? They don't. I don't. It's if I never lived back there.' But she also knew that if she had flown back that night, by the next morning it would seem as though she had never left, and she would feel again that she never could. 'I think the thing about New York is that it's addictive. Once you break the habit you're all right, but while you're hooked'—she smiled warmly at him—'watch out!'

'I've known women like that in my lifetime!' He danced mischievously as he sipped steaming coffee from his delicate white cup.

'Have you now, Mr. Jordan? Would you care to tell me about that?'

'Nope.' He smiled again. 'What about you? Did you leave anyone waiting for you in New York, or did you run away from all of that too?'

Her eyes grew serious for a moment after he asked her and then she shook her head. 'I didn't run away, Tate. I left. For a vacation . . .' She hesitated again. 'A sabbatical, I think they called it at the office. And no, I didn't leave anyone waiting back there. I thought you understood all of that the other day.'

'It never hurts to ask.'

'I haven't been out with anyone since my husband.'

'Since August?' She was surprised that he had remembered but she nodded. 'Don't you think it's about time?'

She didn't want to tell him that she was beginning to think so right now. 'Maybe. It'll all happen at the right time.'

'Will it?' He spoke softly as he leaned toward her and kissed her as he had before. Once again she felt her heart pounding against the table as her body moved toward him, and with one hand he gently cupped her face as the other smoothed her silken hair. 'My God, you're beautiful, Sam. You take my breath away, do you know that?' He kissed her again, and then pushed the plates across the table and pulled her toward him, until suddenly they were both breathless as they kissed in the silent house. It was then that Sam gently pulled away from him, with a small embarrassed smile on her lips.

'Aunt Caro would be shocked, Tate.'

'Would she?' He looked unconvinced. 'Somehow I doubt that.' And at the same moment they both found themselves thinking of Caroline and Bill King on their little trip. They would probably spend the night together somewhere on the road. It made Sam think again of the little hidden cabin, and Tate smiled as his mind drifted back to it too. 'If it weren't so dark we could ride out there. I liked being there with you, Sam.'

'At the cabin?' She had understood immediately what

he had been thinking, and he nodded.

'I felt the other day'—his voice caressed her and he stood up—as though it had been made just for us.' She smiled at him and slowly he pulled her to her feet until she stood before him, dwarfed by his size, her own tall frame tiny beside his, her breasts suddenly pressed against him as he pulled her to him, and her mouth hungry for his once again as gently he stroked her back and her hair. He pulled away then and his voice was only a whisper. 'I know this sounds crazy, Sam, but I love you. I knew it the first time I saw you. I wanted to touch you and to hold you and to run my hands through that palomino hair.' He smiled gently down at her but Samantha looked pensive. 'Do you believe me, Sam?'

Her big blue eyes found his green ones and she looked troubled. 'I don't know what I believe, Tate. I was thinking of what I said to you the other day, that just making love with someone wouldn't be enough. Is that why you said all this?'

'No.' His voice was still a whisper, his mouth near her ear as he kissed her neck. 'I said it because I mean it. I've been thinking about you a lot since the other day. What you want isn't different from what I feel, Sam.' His voice grew stronger as he reached out and took her hands. 'You just want me to put words to my feelings. I'm not used to doing that. It's easier to say "I want to make love to you" than it is to say "I love you." But I've never met a woman I've wanted as much as I want you.'

'Why?' She spoke in a hoarse whisper with all the hurt John had left her sharply etched in her eyes. 'Why do you want me?'

'Because you're so lovely . . .' He reached out gently and touched her breasts with his powerful yet caring hands. 'Because I like the way you laugh and the way you talk . . . and the way you ride that damn horse Caro's . . . the way you work like an ox with the men though you don't have to . . . because I like'—he gripped and let his hands slip around her—the way your ass sits on top of your legs.' She laughed in answer and

pushed his hands away. 'Isn't that good enough reason?'

'Good enough reason for what, Mr. Jordan?' She was teasing him now as she turned away from him and began to clear the table, but before she could get their plates to the sink, he had taken them from her, set them down, and picked her up easily in his arms and carried her out of the room, making his way across the living room until he reached the long hall that led to her room. 'Is this the way, Samantha?' His voice was ever so gentle and his eyes burned into hers. She wanted to tell him to stop, to turn back, but she found that she couldn't. She only nodded and pointed vaguely down the hall, and then, giggling suddenly, she pushed away from him.

'Come on . . . stop, Tate. Put me down!' His laughter joined hers but he didn't do as she told him. Instead he stopped at a half-open door at the end of the hall.

'Is this yours?'

'Yes.' She crossed her arms as he held her in his as though she were a very small child. 'But I didn't invite you in, did I?'

'Didn't you?' One eyebrow rose and he crossed the threshold and looked around with interest. And then with no further words he set her down on the bed, took her in his arms, and kissed her hard on the mouth. The games between them were suddenly over, and the passion he unleashed in her took her very much by surprise. She was stunned at the force with which he held her to him, at the hunger of his mouth and his hands and his whole body as it reached out for hers. It seemed only moments later that he lay beside her and that her clothes seemed to melt away from her body, as did his. All she was aware of was the soft dooskin of his flesh against hers, the gentleness of his hands—ever searching, ever thrilling—the endless legs wound around hers, and his mouth drinking her own. He held her closer to him until she could bear it no longer and she pressed against him, moaning softly, longing to be his. It was then that he pulled away from her, that he looked hard into her eyes, asking her a question without words. Tate Jordan had never taken a woman, and would not

take this one, not ever, and not now, unless this she wanted, unless he was certain, and as he searched her eyes she nodded slowly, and then seconds later he took her, pressing deep and hard into her flesh with his own. She gave a sharp gasp of pleasure as he thrust deeper, and then with another moan she let herself go to the ecstasy he brought her to again and again and again.

It seemed hours later when he lay still beside her, the room was dark, the house quiet, and she felt his long powerful body stretched out next to her, content, sated, and she felt with pleasure his lips gentle on her neck. 'I love you, Palomino. I love you.' The words sounded so real, but suddenly she wanted to ask him 'Do you?' Was it real? Would anyone ever really love her again? Love her and mean it, love her and not hurt her, love her and not go away? A small trickle of tears suddenly fell from the corner of her eye to the pillow, and he looked at her sadly and nodded his head. He pulled her into his arms then and cradled her gently, crooning to her softly meaningless words as one would have to a wounded animal or a very small child. 'It's all right, babe. It's all right now, I'm here with you . . .'

'I'm sorry . . .' Her words were muffled as suddenly the sobs of a lifetime broke from her, and the grief that had lived pent up inside her broke from her like a flock of wild birds. They lay like that, locked together, for almost an hour, and when her tears were spent, she felt a familiar stirring beside her and she smiled slowly and reached down to touch him, and then guide him to the same spot again.

'You all right now?' His voice was husky in the darkness, and she nodded. 'Answer me.'

'I'm all right'. He would go no further and his eyes were riveted to hers.

'You sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure.' With her body she showed him the gratitude that she didn't know the words for, arching toward him and giving him as much pleasure as he had given her. It was a meshing of two people beyond any she

had ever known in the years before him, and as she lay beside Tate Jordan and slept, Samantha wore a small happy smile.

When the alarm went off at her bedside the next morning, she awoke slowly, with a smile, expecting to see him, and what she saw instead was a note beneath the small clock. He had set it for her when he had left her bed quietly at two o'clock that morning. He had turned on the alarm and written her a note on a little scrap of paper. It said only I LOVE YOU, PALOMINO. And as she read it she lay back on her pillows again, closed her eyes, and smiled. This time there were no tears.

13

At the end of the day's work Samantha looked as fresh and alive as she had at the beginning, and Josh commented on it with disgust as she hung up her saddle with a grin.

'Christ, woman! Look at you, Sam, tough as nails. Three weeks ago you could hardly walk after a day's ride, you were so out of shape. Now you fly off that damn horse and look as bright-eyed at six o'clock at night as you do in the morning when you get up. Makes me sick. You ought to be carrying *me* back to *my* cabin. My ass is sore as hell, and my arms are killing me from roping those damn steers. Maybe what you need is to shake your butt and work a little harder.'

'Bullshit. I worked harder than you did today!'

'Oh, yeah?' He snarled playfully at her and swatted her behind with his hat as she walked past.

'Yeah!' She ran past him with a grin on her face and a long blonde ponytail tied with a bright red ribbon. She had almost flown in her saddle all day long. All she had

been able to think of was Tate Jordan, but neither had given anything away as they worked. If anything, he had been indifferent and almost surly, and she had done her best to ignore him the few times they might have had occasion to speak. He spoke to her casually only once over coffee at lunchtime and then strolled away to chat with some of the other men while Sam hung back with the ranch hands she knew best. It was only now that the day was over that she allowed her thoughts to soar toward Tate again. All day she had remembered moments of their night together, an instant, a glimmer, the shape of his leg as he had lain naked and uncovered amidst the tousled sheets, a look in his eye as he leaned toward her to kiss her again, the way the back of his neck looked as he lay down for a moment with a happy sigh and let her run long, tantalising fingers slowly down his tingling spine. She loved the way he looked and the way he felt and what he did to her, and now it was all she could think of as she ran back to Aunt Caro's house. She had no idea when she might see him alone again. His cabin was highly visible, so near to the main hall where the men ate, and Aunt Caro was back from her brief trip with Bill. It was obvious that a meeting between them would take some arranging, but she felt certain that he would find a way. The thought that now he and Bill King would both tiptoe into the house and then creep out again at midnight brought a gurgle of laughter to her lips as she opened the front door.

'My, aren't you happy this evening, Miss Samantha,' Caroline eyed her with pleasure from where she sat. And for the first time in four months she saw John's familiar face and felt not a twinge. She checked for a moment, narrowed her eyes pensively as she watched him, and then shrugged with a small quiet smile as she went to her room to wash up.

'I'll be back in a minute, Aunt Caro.'

When she returned, they shared dinner, only tonight Samantha found herself wondering where Tate was. Was he in the main dining hall with the others? Had he opted to stay in his cabin and cook for himself, as a few of the

men did? But most of them preferred to eat dinner with the others. Even the men with wives on the ranch often came to the main hall after dinner for coffee and a smoke and the companionship of the men they rode with all day long. Suddenly Samantha ached to be with them, but she also sensed that if she joined them all of a sudden in the evening they would begin to wonder why she was there. They accepted her in their midst in the daytime, but in the evening they expected her to stay at the big house with Caroline, where she belonged. It would have shocked them to see her there in the evening, and it would have been impossible to seek out Tate without causing comment. Someone would have easily figured it out. Gossip on any ranch was rampant, and there was a kind of sensitive radar that all of them seemed to have. Romances and marriages and divorces were almost instantly discovered, along with illicit affairs and illegitimate babies, which made it all the more remarkable that Bill King and Caroline had kept their secret for so long. Even if some of the old timers, or those who knew them well, suspected, no one on the ranch had ever been sure. Samantha found now that she respected that and understood all the more how difficult the clandestine life-style must have been. Now she felt herself fairly throbbing with excitement, aching to be with the man, to talk to him, to laugh, to tease him, to touch him, to go for a walk in the night air, to look up at him with interest and pride and hold his hand, and after that to come back to her bedroom and discover each other's bodies once again, as they had the night before.

'Do you want more salad, Samantha?' They were halfway through dinner before Samantha seemed to remember where she was. For half an hour she had been silent and dreamy and drifting as Caroline watched her and wondered what was the cause. Sam didn't look unhappy, so she didn't think she was upset that Caroline had been watching the newscast. She didn't look homesick. In fact she looked fine, so it had to be something else. 'Something wrong, Sam?'

'Hmm?'

'Something right?'
'What? . . . Oh . . . I'm sorry.' Samantha blushed like a schoolgirl and then shook her head with a brief girlish laugh. 'No, I was just distracted. It was a long day today, but I enjoyed it.' It was the only way she could explain the outrageous glow she knew she wore and the look on her face.

'What on earth did you do?'
'Nothing special. Roped some horses, checked the fences, the men roped some steers this afternoon . . .' She tried to remember. Mostly she had dreamed about Tate. 'It was just a nice day really.'

The wise old woman watched her closely. 'I'm glad that you're happy here on the ranch.'

Samantha's face grew oddly serious as she remembered. 'I am, Aunt Caro. I'm happier here than I've been anywhere else in a long time.'

Caroline nodded and addressed herself to her salad as Samantha went back to dreaming of Tate. But it wasn't until the next morning that she saw him. The night before she had heard Bill King come and go, with envy this time. But there had been no way that Tate could come to her, and as she lay in her bed, longing for him, she smiled to herself, it was like being eighteen and having an illicit affair. She felt suddenly young and girlish, terribly clandestine, and impatient to be with him again.

It was seven o'clock the next morning, Sunday, when she gulped her coffee, zipped up her jeans, donned her jacket, brushed her hair one last time, and then ran out to the barn, hoping that she might find him there. As it turned out, when she got there, there as no one. The men who had come to feed the horses had already gone back to the main hall to eat, and she was alone in the huge barn with the familiar horses, each one in its stall, quietly eating or resting or softly greeting each other, as Samantha slowly made her way to Black Beauty's stall. She ran a hand slowly down his muzzle and then felt the soft whiskered lips brush her hand, looking for something to eat.

'I didn't bring you anything this morning, Beauty. I'm sorry, boy.'

'Never mind him.' The low voice came from behind her. 'What did you bring me?'

'Oh!' She wheeled around to face him, startled, and before she could catch her breath, he had taken her swiftly in his arms, almost crushing the air out of her lungs as he held her and kissed her quickly, and then let her go.

'Good morning, Palomino.' He spoke in a whisper and she blushed.

'Hello . . . I missed you.'

'I missed you too. Do you want to go to the cabin this morning?' Anyone even a few feet from them couldn't have heard him speaking, and Samantha nodded quickly with a bright light of anticipation in her eyes.

'I'd like that.'

'I'll meet you at the south fence, in the clearing. Do you know where that is?' He looked suddenly worried as he watched her as though he were afraid she might get lost, but she only laughed.

'Are you kidding? Where do you think I've been all week long while you've been working?'

'I don't know, babe.' He grinned at her. 'Same place I've been, I suspect. Halfway out of your head.'

'You're not far wrong.' And then, as he made to go, she grabbed at his sleeve and whispered, 'I love you.'

He nodded, brushed her lips with his own, and whispered in answer, 'I love you too. See you at ten.' And then he was gone, his heels clicking loudly on the barn floor, and a moment later as he turned a bend there was a shouted greeting to two of the men coming to tend to their horses. A moment earlier and they would have seen him kissing Samantha. Instead all they saw now was Sam diligently feeding Caroline's best horse.

this ranch someday?" He nodded slowly, being honest with her. He had a great deal of ambition, all of it centred around this ranch.

'Yeah. I'd like to make it something very special one day, if Miss Caro will let me. I'm not sure she will, while old Bill is around.'

Samantha spoke softly, almost reverently. 'I hope he always will be, Tate, for her sake.'

He nodded slowly. 'So do I. But one day, one day . . . there are some things I'd like to change on this ranch.' Closing the album carefully, he began to tell her. An hour later he glanced at the electric clock in the kitchen and stopped. 'Listen to me, Sam. I could go on like this for hours.' He smiled sheepishly but it was obvious that she had enjoyed it.

'I like hearing about it.' And then after a minute, 'Why don't you start your own ranch?'

But he laughed and shook his head. 'With what, little Palomino? Good wishes and old beer cans? Do you have any idea what it would cost to start a decent ranch? A fortune. Not on my pay, babe. No, all I want is to be one hell of a foreman, not an assistant foreman, but the real thing. The man in power. Hell, most of the ranchers don't know their ass from a hole in the ground. The foreman is the one who keeps the place running.'

'You do that here.' She eyed him proudly and he gently touched her hair and then cupped a hand under her chin.

'I try, little Palomino. I try when I'm not playing hookie with you. You could make me almost sorry I'm working. All I wanted to do yesterday was come here with you, and make love to you and sit by the fire and feel good.'

Samantha stared into the fire with dreams in her eyes. 'So did I.' And then after a moment she turned her eyes back to him. 'What are we going to do, Tate?'

'About what?' He was teasing her. He knew what she meant.

'Don't be cute. You know what I mean.' And then she giggled. 'The other night I had this vision of you and B King tiptoeing into the house and bumping into ea

other in the dark.' They both laughed at the image and he pulled her close, with a pensive look in his eyes. He had already mulled over the possibilities, and all of them were complicated, none of them was ideal.

'I don't know, Sam, it would be a lot easier if it were summer. We could come here every night after work and ride back in the moonlight under the stars. But it's dark as hell now when we finish, and I'd be afraid one of the horses might stumble and get hurt.'

'We could carry lanterns.'

'Sure.' He grinned at her. 'Or hire a helicopter, why not?'

'Oh, shut up. Well . . . what are we going to do? Do you want to try sneaking into Aunt Caro's?'

He shook his head slowly. 'No. They'd hear us, just like you told me you hear him coming in every night. And my place is so damn wide open. All it would take would be for one of the men to see you, just once, and it would be all over for us.'

'Would it?' Samantha looked strained as she said it. 'Would it really be so awful if they knew?' He nodded slowly. 'Why?'

'It's not right, Sam. You are who you are and I am who I am. You don't want them talking and neither do I.' But the truth was that she didn't give a damn. She thought she loved him, and she didn't give two pins what anyone said. What could they do to hurt them? But she saw in his face that it was a sacred rule. Ranchers didn't fall in love with ranch hands.

Samantha looked at Tate squarely. 'I'm not going to play the same game they've played, Tate, not forever. If we stay together, I want people to know it. I want to be able to be proud of what we have, not afraid of who might find out.'

'We'll cross that bridge later.' But she had the feeling that he wasn't prepared to move an inch in her direction, and suddenly she bridled and the light in her eyes was as stubborn as his.

'Why? Why not start dealing with it right now? Okay, I

understand we don't have to advertise to everybody right this minute that we're having an affair. But hell, Tate, I'm not going to sneak around forever.'

'No.' He said it very quietly. 'Eventually you're going back to New York.' The words hit her like a wave of cold water, and when she spoke again, there was ice and pain in her voice.

'What makes you so sure?'
'Because that's where you belong, just like I belong here.'

'Is that right? How do you know that? How do you know that I'm not like Caroline, that I haven't decided I don't want that kind of life anymore, not that my life is like hers was?'

'You know how I know?' He looked at her with the full wisdom of his forty-plus years. 'Because when Caroline came here, she was a widow, she wanted to give up the life she had shared with her husband, because he was gone. And she was forty years old, Sam, that's not the same as thirty or thirty-one. You're young, you still have a lot o' living to do, a lot of your crazy commercials to put together, a lot of deals to make, a lot of buses to catch, phone calls to make, planes to miss, parties to go to . . .'

'And I couldn't do some of that here?' She looked at him and he eyed her gently, with wisdom and tenderness and love.

'No, little one, you couldn't. This isn't the place that. You came here to heal, Sam, and that's what you doing, and maybe I'm just part of that. I love you. I n laid eyes on you before three weeks ago, and I ha really given a damn about a woman in years, but I k love you. I knew it the first day we met. And I hope you Sam, they don't belong together, and they never will. She's educated, he isn't. She's led one hell of a fancy life, and his idea of class is a solid-gold toothpick and a fifty-cent cigar. She owns the ranch and he ain't got a hill of beans. But she loves him, and he loves her, and this was all she wanted. For my own reasons I think she was a little

crazy, but she'd had another life, and maybe after that this was enough for her. You're different, Sam, you're so much younger, and you've got a right to so much more than I could give you here.' It was totally crazy, they had known each other for less than a month, and only been lovers for two days, and yet they were talking about the future as though it really mattered, as though there were even a question of their staying together for the rest of time. Samantha eyed him with amazement and then looked at him with a small smile.

'You're crazy, Tate Jordan. But I love you.' And then she took his face in her hands and kissed him, hard, on the lips, and then sat back and crossed her arms. 'And if I want to stay here, if this is the life I want, whether I'm thirty or ninety or eighteen, then that's my decision. I am not Caroline Lord, and you are not Bill King, and you can save your damn self-sacrificing speeches, mister, because when the time comes, I'm going to do exactly what I want to do. If I don't want to go back to New York, you can't make me, and if it's you I want for the rest of my life, then I'll follow you to the ends of the earth and bug you to death until you announce it to every last goddamn ranch hand, and Caroline and Bill. You're not going to get rid of me as easily as you'd like to. You got that?' She was grinning at him, but she saw that there was still a broad streak of resistance in his eyes. It didn't matter though, he didn't know her, and the truth of it was that with only one recent exception, what Sam Taylor wanted, she got. 'Got that, mister?'

'Yeah, I got it.' But without saying more, this time it was Tate who kissed her and silenced her almost completely as he threw off the warm blanket and cast it over both of them. Only moments later they were once more blended together, their legs and their arms and their bodies one shimmering tangle as their lips held and the fire crackled nearby. And when it was over, he pulled his lips from hers breathlessly and carried her back to the little blue bedroom where they began again. It was after

had slept and made love and slept and made love
afternoon, and now regretfully Tate swatted her bottom,
and then went into the bathroom to run a hot tub. They
took a bath together, his endless limbs wrapped around
her, as she giggled and told him stories of her early
summers on the ranch.

'You know, we still haven't solved our problem.'

'I didn't know we had one.' He lay his head back on the
edge of the tub and closed his eyes in the hot bath.

'I mean about where and how to meet.'

He fell silent for a long moment as he thought it over
and then shook his head. 'Damn, I wish I knew. What do
you think, Sam?'

'I don't know. My room at Aunt Caro's? I could let you
in the window.' She laughed nervously. It really had
overtones of being fifteen years old and very "fast". 'Your
place?'

He nodded slowly. 'I guess so. But I don't like it.' And
then suddenly he brightened. 'I've got it. Hennessey's
been bitching for two months about his house. Says the
cabin's too small for him, it sits in the wind, it's too far
from the chow hall. He's been driving us all nuts.'

'So?'

'I'll trade him. His place is on the edge of the camp
almost behind Caro's. At least if you go there, no one
should see you. It's a hell of a lot better than where I am
right now.'

'You don't think they'll suspect?'

'Why should they?' He grinned at her in the steam from
the bathtub. 'I don't plan to pinch your ass every day
breakfast or kiss you on the mouth before we ride.'

'Why not, don't you love me?'

He said nothing, but only leaned forward, kissed
tenderly, and then fondled her breasts. 'Matter of fact,
little Palomino, I do.'

She raised herself on her knees in the old bathtub
then knelt facing him with everything she felt in her
'So do I, Tate Jordan. So do I.'

They rode back that night after seven, and Sam

intensely grateful that she knew Caroline had gone to dinner at another ranch. Otherwise Caroline would have been frantic. But the day had slipped past them, with their chatter and their laughter and their loving, and now as Sam came back to the main ranch house she felt a sudden loss at not being with him. It was as though someone had severed her right arm. It was an odd feeling to have about a man she had known for so little time, but isolated as they were from the rest of the world, there was something special and intense about their feelings, and she found herself longing for him again as she sat alone in the empty house. Caroline had left her a note that expressed concern at her long absence but not panic, and she had also left a warm dinner on the stove, which Sam only picked at before going to bed at eight thirty and lying there in the dark, thinking of Tate.

When Caroline came home that night with Bill King beside her, they tiptoed stealthily into the darkened house, and Bill went immediately to her room. Sam's presence in the house had made things a little awkward, and Caroline had to remind him every night not to close the front door so hard, but he didn't hear. Now Caroline walked softly down the hall to Sam's room, opened the door, peered into the moonlit darkness, and saw the beautiful young woman asleep in her bed. She stood watching her for a moment, feeling that her own youth had come back to haunt her, and then silently she walked into the room. She thought that she knew what was happening, yet as she had known it for herself, it was something that couldn't be changed or stopped. One had to live one's life. She stood there for a long time, gazing down at Samantha, her hair fanned out on her pillow, her face so unlined and so happy, and with tears in her eyes, Caroline reached out and touched the sleeping girl's hand. It did nothing to wake Sam as she lay there, and on still-silent feet Caroline left the room again.

When she returned to her own room, Bill was waiting in his pyjamas and taking a last puff on his cigar. 'Where were you? Still hungry after all that dinner?'

'No.' Caroline shook her head, oddly quiet. 'I wanted to

make sure that Sam was all right.'

'Is she?'

'Yes. She's sleeping.' They had thought so when they saw the darkened house.

'She's a nice girl. That guy she was married to must've been a damn fool to run off with that other woman.' He hadn't been impressed with what he'd seen of Liz on TV.

Caroline nodded silent agreement and then wondered how many of them were damn fools. She to have let Bill force silence on her for two decades, keeping their love for each other secret; Bill for living like a criminal, as he tiptoed in and out of her house for more than twenty years; Samantha for falling for a man and a way of life that were both as foreign to her and possibly as dangerous as jumping off the top of the Empire State Building; and Tate Jordan for falling in love with a girl he couldn't have. Use Caroline knew exactly what was happening. She

felt it in her bones, in her gut, in her soul. She had seen Sam's eyes before Sam even knew it, sensed it on Christmas when she saw Tate look at Sam while she was busy doing something else. Caroline saw it all, and yet she liked to pretend that she saw nothing, knew nothing and nothing, and suddenly she didn't want that anymore.

'Bill.' She looked at him strangely, took his cigar away, and set it down in the ashtray. 'I want to get married.'

'Sure, Caro.' He grinned and fondled her left breast. 'Don't.' She brushed him away. 'I mean it.' And something suddenly told him that she did.

'You're senile! Why would we get married now?'

'Because at our age you shouldn't be sneaking in and out of our house in the middle of the night, it's bad for my nerves and your arthritis.'

'You're crazy.' He lay back against the headboard with a look of shock.

'Maybe. But I'll tell you something. By now, I don't think we'll surprise anyone. And what's more, I don't think anyone would care. No one would remember what or where I come from, so all your old arguments are nonsense. All they know after all this time is that I'm

Caroline Lord and you're Bill King of the Lord Ranch. Period.'

'Not period.' He looked suddenly ferocious. 'They know you're the rancher and I'm the foreman.'

'Who gives a damn?'

'I do. And you should. And the men do. There's a difference, Caro. You know that after all these years. And I'll be damned'—he almost roared it at her—'if I'll make you a laughingstock. Running off and marrying the foreman—the hell I will.'

'Fine.' She glared at him. 'Then I'll fire you, and you can come back as my husband.'

'Woman, you're crazy.' He wouldn't even discuss it. 'Now turn the light out. I'm tired.'

'So am I . . .' She looked at him unhappily. 'Of hiding, that's what I'm tired of after all these years. I want to be married, dammit, Bill.'

'Then marry another rancher.'

'Go to hell.' She glared at him and he turned off the light, and the conversation was ended. It was the same conversation they had had a hundred times over the last twenty years, and there was no winning. As far as he knew, she was the rancher, and he was the foreman. And as she lay on her side of the bed, her eyes filled with tears, her back to him, she fervently prayed that Samantha would not fall hopelessly in love with Tate Jordan, because she knew that it would end no differently than this. There was a code that these men followed, a code that made sense to no one but them, but they lived by it, and Caroline knew that they always would.

The exchange of cabins between Tate Jordan and Harry Hennessey was completed within four days. Hennessey was enchanted with Tate's offer, and with the appropriate amount of grumbling, Tate eventually moved his things. He claimed that he didn't particularly like his cabin, was sick and tired of hearing Hennessey bitch, and had no vested interest in any of the cabins. No one took any particular notice of the transaction, and by Thursday night Tate had unpacked all his things. In her room at Aunt Caro's, Samantha waited patiently in the dark until nine thirty, when Caroline was safely in her room. Samantha left via her window and padded through the garden at the rear of the house, until only a few moments later she reached Tate's front door. His new cabin was almost directly behind the house and could be seen by no other. It was even protected from the view of the big house by the fruit trees at the back end of the garden, so there was no one who could see Samantha slip quietly through the door. Tate was waiting for her, barefoot, bare-chested, and in blue jeans, his hair almost blue-black, with salt at the temples and liquid green fire in his eyes. His skin was as smooth as satin, and he folded her rapidly into his arms. Moments later they were between clean sheets on his narrow bed. It was only after they had made love that they indulged in conversation, that she giggled about sneaking out of her window and told him that she was sure that at that very moment Bill King was tiptoeing through the front door.

'Doesn't this all seem ridiculous at our age?' She was amused but he wasn't.

'Just think of it as romantic.' Like Bill King with his concern for Caro, Tate Jordan had no intention of turning

Sam into a laughingstock on the ranch. She was no quick piece of ass, no easy lay from New York. She was one hell of a special lady, and now she was his woman, and he would protect her if he had to, even from herself. And she understood nothing of the code of behaviour between ranchers and ranch hands. What they did was their business and no one else's, and always would be, no matter what Samantha said. It was a point that she no longer chose to argue, there were always too many other things to say. She knew his position now, and he was well aware of hers, there was nothing left to be said for the moment about their clandestine arrangements. And it was comfortable enough for a while. For some reason, in her own mind, she had decided to make it an 'open secret' by summer. She figured by then they would have been lovers for six or seven months, and he would be less uptight about the others knowing the score. And she realised as she thought of the summer that suddenly she was thinking of staying on at the ranch. It was the first time that she had admitted to herself that she might stay there, and it brought up the question of what she would do with her job in New York. But she figured that there was time to work that out too. It was still only December, although it already felt as though she had been on the Lord Ranch, and was Tate Jordan's woman, for a number of years.

'Happy?' he asked her just before they drifted off to sleep, linked together, her legs entwined in his, and his arm around her shoulders.

'Mmmm . . .' She smiled at him with her eyes closed, and he kissed her eyelids once just before she drifted off to sleep. She awoke when he did at four o'clock the next morning and made her way back through the orchards behind the garden, slipped in through her half-open window, and turned on the lights. She showered as she always did, dressed, went to the main hall for breakfast, and thus, for Samantha Taylor, began a new life.

On Valentine's Day she got a card from Charlie Peterson from her office that made reference to her empty office. For the first time she thought of the job waiting for her in New York. She told Tate about it that night as she lay in his arms. It was a nightly ritual now. She was there each night no later than nine o'clock, after eating dinner with Aunt Caro and then taking a bath.

'What's he like?' Tate watched her with interest as she flung herself on the couch with a happy grin.

'Charlie?' She narrowed her eyes at the man who now felt like her husband. 'Are you jealous?'

'Should I be?' His voice was even.

'Hell no!' The words were blended with a shout of laughter. 'He and I have never been involved, besides he has a wife and three sons and she's pregnant again. I just love him like a brother, you know, kind of like my best buddy. We've worked together for years.'

He nodded. And then, 'Sam, don't you miss your job?'

She was silent and pensive for a moment before answering and then shook her head. 'You know, the amazing thing is that I don't. Caroline says it was that way for her too. When she left her old life, she just left it. And she never had any desire to go back. I feel that way too, I miss it less and less every day.'

'But you miss it some?' He had trapped her, and she rolled over on her stomach now and looked into his eyes as she lay on the couch and he sat near her with his back to the fire.

'Sure, I miss some of it. Like sometimes I miss my apartment, or some of my books, or my things. But I don't miss my life there. Or my job. Most of the things that I do miss are all the things that I could bring here if I wanted

to. But the job . . . it's so strange, I spent all that time working so hard, and trying so damn hard to become important, and now . . .' She shrugged at him and looked like a very young, very blonde sprite. 'I just don't give a damn about that anymore. All I care about is if the steers are rounded up, if there's work to be done, if Navajo needs new shoes, if the fence in the north pasture is down. I don't know, Tate, it's as though something happened. As though I became a different person when I left New York.'

'But somewhere in you, Sam, is still that old person. That person who wanted to write prize-winning commercials and be important in your line of work. You're going to miss that one day.'

'How do you know that?' She looked suddenly angry. 'Why do you keep pushing me to be what I don't want to be anymore? Why? Do you want me to go back? Are you scared of the commitment, Tate, of what it might mean?'

'Maybe. I have a right to be scared, Sam, you're a hell of a woman.' He knew that she wasn't willing to keep their life together a secret forever, that she wanted their love out in the open. That was something that worried him a great deal.

'Well, don't push me. Right now I don't want to go back. And if I do, I'll tell you.'

'I hope so.' But they both knew that her leave of absence had only six more weeks to run. She had promised herself that she would make a decision by mid-March. She still had a month. But only two weeks later, as they rode slowly back from the secret cabin where they still spent idyllic Sundays, he looked mischievous and told her that he had a surprise.

'What kind of surprise?'

'You'll see when we get home.' He leaned over toward her from where he sat on his pinto and kissed her full on the lips.

'Let's see . . . what could it be . . . ?' She managed to look both naughty and pensive, and also very young, at the same time. She had her long blonde hair in two pigtailed tied with red ribbons, and she was wearing a

brand-new pair of red snakeskin cowboy boots. Tate had teased her horribly about them, telling her that they were even worse than Caro's green ones, but with the Blass and Ralph Lauren and Halston wardrobe cast off since she'd arrived at the ranch, they had been her only whimsical purchase in three months. 'You bought me another pair of boots? Violet ones this time?'

'Oh, no . . .' he groaned as they rode slowly home. 'Pink?'

'I think I'm going to throw up.'

'All right, something else. Let's see . . . a waffle iron?' He shook his head. 'A new toaster?' She grinned, she had set fire to theirs only last week. 'A puppy?' She looked hopeful and he smiled but once again shook his head. 'A turtle? A snake? A giraffe? A hippopotamus?' She laughed and so did he. 'Hell, I don't know. What is it?'

'You'll see.'

As it turned out, it was a brand-new colour television, which he had just bought through Josh's brother-in-law in the nearest town. Josh had promised to drop it off at Tate's place on Sunday. And Tate had told him to leave inside while he was out. And when he and Samantha can through the door, he pointed with an expression of pri mixed with glee.

'Tate! Babe, this is great!' But she was a lot less excited than she knew he was. She had been perfectly happy without one. And then she pouted coyly. 'Does this mean the honeymoon is over?'

'Hell no!' He was quick to prove it, but afterward he turned on the TV. The Sunday news report was on. It was a special weekly wrap-up usually done by someone else, but tonight for some reason John Taylor was handling it, and as Sam saw him she suddenly stopped and stared at him, as though she was seeing him for the first time. It had been almost three months since she'd seen his face on TV, five since she'd seen him in person, and she realised now that she didn't care anymore. All that terrible hurt and pain had faded and all that was left now was a vague feeling of disbelief. Was this truly the man she had once

lived with? Had she really loved that man for eleven years? Now as she watched him she thought he looked plastic and pompous, and suddenly the clear realisation of how totally self-centred he was came to her for the first time and she wondered why she had never seen it before. 'You like him, Sam?' Tate was watching her with interest, his angular rugged countenance in complete contrast to the baby-smooth golden boy looks of the younger man on the TV screen. And with an odd little smile Sam slowly shook her head, and then turned to face Tate.

'No, I don't.'

'You're sure watching him pretty close.' And then Tate grinned. 'Go on, you can tell the truth. Does he turn you on?'

This time it was Samantha who grinned. She smiled with a look of freedom and relief and suddenly, finally, knew it was over. She no longer had any tie whatsoever to John Taylor. She was her own woman now, and it was Tate Jordan whom she loved. In fact she didn't give a damn if they'd had their baby, and she didn't care if she never saw either John or Liz again. But Tate was persistent as he watched her, sprawled out in the bed he had bought to accommodate their loving, with the soft blue blanket held to her chest.

'Come on, Sam, does he?'

'Nope,' she finally answered with a note of triumph. She kissed Tate playfully on the neck then. 'But you do.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Are you kidding?' She whooped with laughter. 'After what we just did all day you can doubt that you turn me on? Tate Jordan, you are craaaaaazzyyyy!'

'I don't mean that, silly. I mean about him. Look . . . Look . . . look at that pretty blond newsman.' He was teasing her and Sam was laughing. 'Look how pretty he is. Don't you want him?'

'Why? Can you get me a special deal? He probably sleeps in a hair net, and he's sixty years old and has had two face-lifts.' For the first time in her life she was

so damn seriously, and she had let him. The face and body and image and life and happiness of John Robert Taylor had been of prime importance to both of them. But what about her? When had Sam really mattered, if ever? Certainly not at the end when he ran off with Liz. Her face grew serious again as she remembered.

'I think you like him and you're too chicken to admit it.' 'Nope. You're wrong, Tate. I don't like him at all.' But she said it with such an air of conviction that he turned his head to look at her again, this time with a look of serious enquiry that hadn't been there before.

'Do you know him?' She nodded, but she looked neither moved nor amused. Mostly she looked indifferent, as though they were talking about a plant or a used car. 'Do you know him well?'

'I used to.' She could see Tate bridle, and she wanted to tease him just a little. She placed a hand on his powerful naked chest and then smiled. 'Don't get yourself excited, sweetheart. It was nothing. We were married for seven years.' For a moment everything seemed to stop in the little room. She could feel Tate's whole body tense beside her, and he sat up in the bed next to her and stared down at her with a look of dismay.

'Are you putting me on, Sam?'

'No.' She looked at him matter-of-factly, unnerved by his reaction, but not sure what it meant. It was probably just shock.

'He was your husband?'

She nodded again. 'Yes.' And then she decided that the occasion needed further explanation. It wasn't every day that one saw the ex-husband of one's current lover on the television screen as one went to bed at night. She told him everything.

'But the funny thing is that I was just thinking as I watched him that I really don't give a damn anymore. When I was in New York, every night I used to watch that damn broadcast. I'd watch both of them, John and Liz, doing their cutesy little routine and talking about their precious baby as though the whole world cared that she

was pregnant, and it used to turn me inside out. Once when I came in, Caro was watching it, and I almost felt sick. And you know what happened tonight when that plastic face came on the screen?" She looked at Tate expectantly but got no answer. 'Absolutely nothing happened. Nothing. I didn't feel a damn thing. Not sick, not nervous, not pissed off, not left out. Nothing.' She smiled broadly. 'I just don't care.'

With that, Tate got up, stalked across the room, and turned off the set. 'I think that's wonderful. You used to be married to one of America's best-looking young heroes, clean-cut preppie John Taylor of television fame, and he leaves you and you find yourself a tired old cowboy, some ten or twelve years older than our hero, without a goddamn dime to his name, shovelling shit on a ranch, and you're trying to tell me that this is bliss? Not only is this bliss, but it's permanent bliss. Is that it, Samantha?' He was steaming, and Samantha felt helpless as she watched. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Why? What difference does it make? Besides, he is not nearly as well known or successful as you seem to think he is.' But that wasn't quite true.

'Bullshit. You want to see my bank account, baby, and compare it to his?' What does he make every year? A hundred grand? Two? Three? You know what I make, Samantha? You want to know? Eighteen thousand before taxes, and that was a big raise for me because I'm the assistant foreman. I'm forty-three years old, for chrissake, and compared to him, I don't make shit.'

'So what? Who gives a damn?' She was suddenly shouting as loud as he was, but she realised that it was because she was scared. Something had just happened to Tate when he learned that she and John had been married, and it frightened her. She didn't expect him to take it this hard. 'The point is . . .' She made a conscious effort to lower her voice as she smoothed the blanket over her legs. By now Tate was pacing the room. 'The point is what happened between us, what kind of people we were, what we were like to each other, what happened at the

end, why he left me, how I felt about him and Liz and their baby. That's what matters, not how much money he makes or the fact that they're on TV. Besides, *they're* on television, Tate, I'm not. What difference does it make? Even if you're jealous of him, just look at him, dammit, he's a fool. He's a plastic little preppie that made good. He got lucky, that's all, he's got blond hair and a pretty face and the ladies around America like that. So what? What does that have to do with you and me? If you want to know what I think, I think it has absolutely nothing to do with us. And I don't give a shit about John Taylor. I love you.'

'So how come you didn't tell me who you were married to?' He sounded suspicious of her now, and she lay back in the bed and tugged at her hair, trying not to scream before she sat up to face him again, which she did with a look in her eye almost as ferocious as the look in his.

'Because I didn't think it was important.'

'Bullshit. You thought I'd feel like two cents, and you know something, sister?' He walked across the room and started to pull on his pants. 'You were right. I do.'

'Then you're crazy.' She was shouting at him openly now, trying to fight his illusions with the truth. 'Because you're worth fifty, a hundred, John Taylors. He's a selfish little son of a bitch who hurt me, for chrissake. You're a grown man, and a smart one, and a good one, and you've done nothing but be good to me since we met.' She looked around the room where they had spent all their evening hours for three months, and saw the paintings he had bought her to cheer the place up, the comfortable bed he had bought, even the colour TV now to amuse her, the pretty sheets they made love on, the books he thought she'd like. She saw the flowers that he picked her when ever he thought no one was looking, the fruit he had brought just for her from the orchards, the sketch of her he done one Sunday at the lake. She thought of the moments and the hours and the gestures, the rolls of film they had taken and the secrets they had shared and she knew once again, for the hundredth time, that John Taylor wasn't fit

to lick Tate Jordan's boots. There were tears in her eyes when she spoke again and her voice was suddenly husky and deep. 'I don't compare you to him, Tate. I love you. I don't love him anymore. That's all that means anything. Please try to understand that. That's all that matters to me.' She reached out to him but he kept his distance, and after a few minutes she let her hand drop to her side as she knelt naked on the bed with tears rolling slowly down her face.

'And you think all of that will mean something to you in five years? Oh, lady, don't be so naive. Five years from now I'll be just another cowboy, and he'll still be one of the most important people on television in this country. You think you won't stare at the set every night while you wash dishes and ask yourself how you wound up with me? This isn't playacting, you know. This is real life. Ranch life. Hard work. No money. This isn't a commercial you're making, lady, this is real.' She began to cry harder now at the fierceness of his words.

'Don't you think it's real to me?'

'How could it be, for chrissake? How could it be, Sam? Look at what you came from and how I live. What's your apartment in New York like? A penthouse on Fifth Avenue? Some fancy-schmancy number with a doorman and a French poodle and marble floors?'

'No, it's a top floor in a town house, a walk-up, if that makes you feel any better.'

'And it's filled with antiques.'

'I have some.'

'They ought to look real cute here.' He said it with feeling and turned away from her to put on his shoes.

'Why the hell are you so angry?' She was shouting again and crying at the same time. 'I'm sorry if I didn't tell you I was married to John Taylor. As it so happens, you're much more impressed with him than I am. I just didn't think it mattered as much as you seem to think.'

'Anything else you didn't tell me? Your father is president of General Motors, you grew up in the White House, you're an heiress?' He looked at her with hostility,

and stark naked, she sprang from his bed like a long, lithe cat.

'No, I'm an epileptic and you're about to give me a fit.' But he didn't even smile at her attempt to tease him out of his mood. He simply went into the bathroom and closed the door, while Sam waited, and when he came out, he glanced at her impatiently.

'Come on, put on your clothes.'

'Why? I don't want to.' She felt terror creep into her heart. 'I'm not leaving.'

'Yes, you are.'

'No, I'm not.' She sat down on the edge of the bed. 'Not until we hash this thing out. I want you to know once and for all that that man doesn't mean anything to me and that I love you. Do you think you can get that through your fat head?'

'What difference does it make?'

'It makes a big difference to me. Because I love you, you big dummy.' She lowered her voice and smiled gently at him, but he didn't return the smile. Instead he looked at her pointedly and picked up a cigar, but he only played with it, he didn't light it.

'You should go back to New York.'

'Why? To chase after a husband I don't want? We're divorced. Remember that? I like it that way now. I'm in love with you.'

'What about your job? You're going to give that up for ranch life too?'

'As a matter of fact . . .' She took a deep breath and almost trembled. What she was about to say now was the biggest step of all, and she knew that she hadn't yet completely thought it through, but it was the time to say it, tonight. She didn't have more time to think it out. ' . . . that's exactly what I've been thinking of doing. Quitting my job and staying here for good.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'Why?'

'You don't belong here.' He sounded exhausted as he said the words. 'You belong there, in your apartment,

working at your high-powered job, getting involved with some man in that world. You don't belong with a cowboy, living in a one-room cabin, shovelling horse shit, and roping steer. Besides, for chrissake, you're a lady.'

'You make it sound very romantic.' She tried to sound sarcastic again but tears stung her eyes.

'It isn't romantic, Sam. Not a bit. That's the whole point. You think it's a fantasy and it's not. Neither am I. I happen to be real.'

'So am I. That's the issue. You refuse to believe that I'm real too, that I have real needs and am a real person and can exist away from New York and my apartment and my job. You refuse to believe that I might want to change my life-style, that maybe New York doesn't suit me anymore, that this is better and it's what I want.'

'So buy yourself a ranch, like Caroline.'

'And then what? You'll believe I'm for real?'

'Maybe you can give me a job.'

'Go to hell.'

'Why not? And then I could sneak in and out of your bedroom for the next twenty years. Is that what you want, Sam? To end up like them, with a secret cabin you're too old and tired to go to, and all you've got left are secret dreams? You deserve a lot better, and if you're not smart enough to know that, then I am.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' She eyed him with terror, but he would not meet her eyes.

'Nothing. It means put your clothes on. I'm taking you home.'

'To New York?' She tried to sound flip and failed.

'Never mind the smart shit, just put on your clothes.'

'Why? What if I don't want to?' She looked like a frightened belligerent child, and he walked over to where she had dropped her clothes in a pile when they made love earlier that evening; he scooped them all up and dumped them in her lap.

'I don't care what you want. This is what I want. Get dressed. I seem to be the only grown-up here.'

'Like hell you are!' She jumped to her feet and dropped

the pile of clothes to the floor. 'You're just locked into your old-fashioned ideas about ranchers and ranch hands, and I won't listen to that bullshit anymore! It's a cop-out and you're wrong and it's stupid.' She was sobbing as she stooped to the floor, picked up her clothes piece by piece, and began to dress. If he was going to be like this, she would go back to the big house. Let him stew in his own juice overnight.

Five minutes later she was dressed and he stood looking at her, with despair and disbelief, as though tonight he had discovered a side of her he had never known, as though she were suddenly a different person. She stood staring at him unhappily and then walked slowly toward the door.

'Do you want me to walk you home?' For a moment she almost relented, but then she decided not to. 'No, thanks, I can manage.' She tried to calm herself as she stood in the doorway. 'You're wrong, you know, Tate.' And then she couldn't help whispering softly 'I love you.' As tears filled her eyes she closed the door and ran home, grateful that once again Caroline was away at nearby ranch. She did that often on Sundays, and tonight Samantha didn't want to see her as she came through the front door, her face streaked with tears.

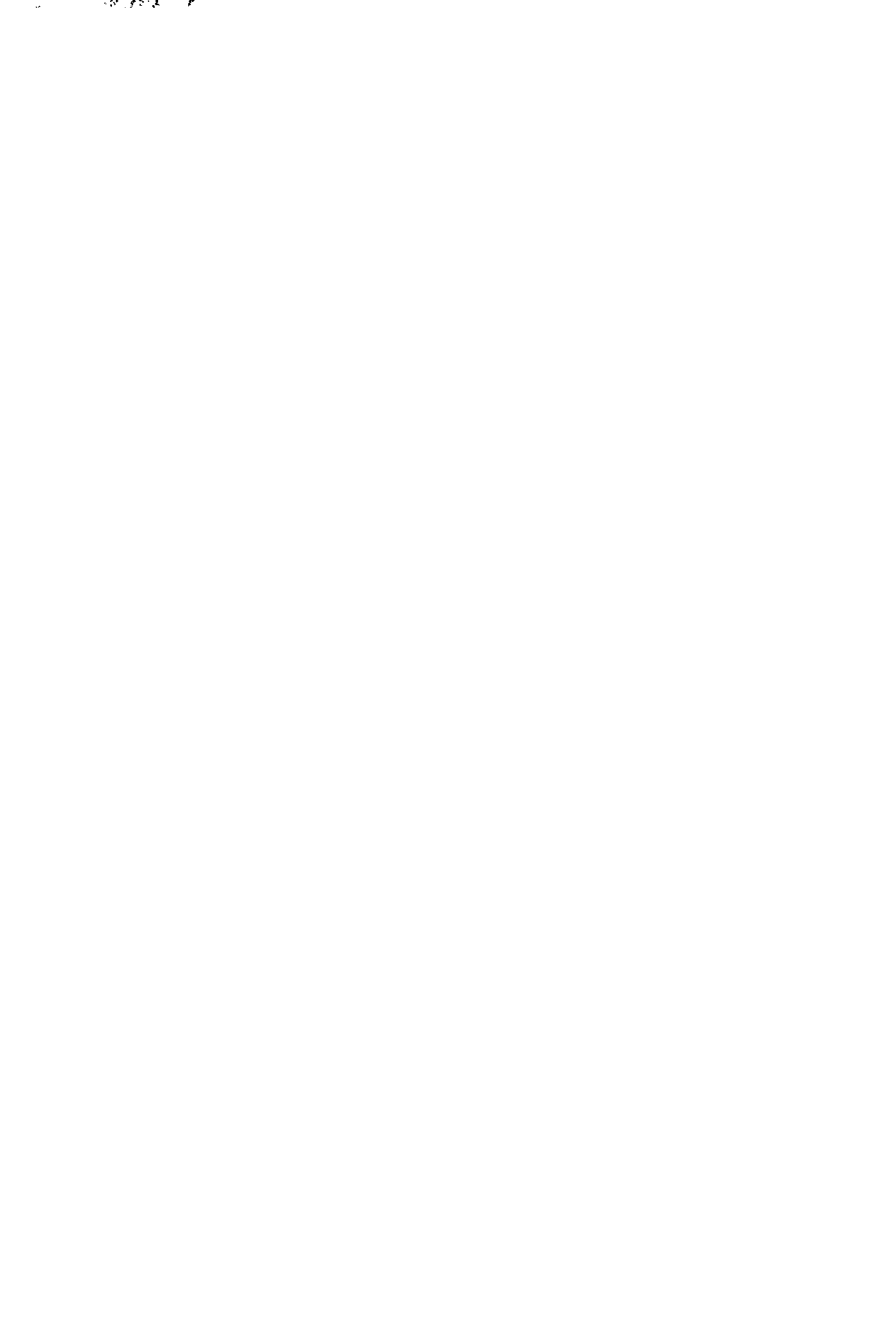
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The next morning Sam lingered in Caroline's kitchen over coffee, staring bleakly into the cup and thinking her own thoughts. She wasn't sure if she should try to talk to him again that evening, or let it sit for a few days and let him come to his senses on his own. She replayed in her mind the previous night's conversation, and her eyes filled with tears again as she stared into her cup. She was grateful

that this morning there was no one around her. She had decided not to go to breakfast in the main hall. She wasn't hungry anyway, and she didn't want to see Tate until they went to work. She was careful not to go to the barn until five minutes before six, and when she saw him, he was in a far corner, with his familiar clipboard, quietly issuing orders, waving toward the far boundaries, pointing toward some of the animals they could see on the hills, and then turning to point to something else. Quietly Sam saddled Navajo as she did every morning, and a few minutes later she was mounted and waiting out in the yard. But for some reason he had put Josh in charge of Sam's group today, and it was obvious that he wouldn't be riding, or at least not with them. All of which annoyed Sam further, it was as though he was going out of his way to avoid her. And with a nasty edge to her voice she leaned toward him and said loudly as her horse walked past him, 'Playing hookie today, Mr. Jordan?'

'No.' He turned to look at her squarely. 'I've got some business to discuss with Bill King.' She nodded, not sure what to answer, but as she turned Navajo at the gate to lock it behind the others, she saw him standing in the yard, watching her with a look of sorrow, and then quietly he turned and walked away. Maybe he was sorry about the fuss he had made about her ex-husband. Maybe he had understood that the differences that existed between them were differences that may have mattered to him, but not to Sam. For an instant she wanted to call out to him, but she didn't dare, the others might hear her, so she spurred Navajo on and joined them for the usual hard day's work.

Twelve hours later, riding more slowly and slumping with fatigue in the heavy Western saddles, they all rode back into the main yard and dismounted, led their horses into the barn, and removed the bridles and the saddles and put them away. Samantha was particularly exhausted that evening, she had spent the whole day thinking about Tate and everything he had said the night before. She was vague and distracted when she said good night to the



had discussed the previous evening, she would have been amused. But as she walked back to Caroline's house in the darkness, she was anything but amused.

She scarcely slept that night as she tossed and turned, wondering why he had done something as radical as switch cabins, and at three thirty she got up, unable to bear it anymore. She pottered around her room for another half an hour, showered, and was still ready too early. She had another half hour to kill, with a cup of coffee in Caroline's kitchen, before she could go to the main hall to eat. And this morning she definitely wanted to be there. If she could catch him even for a moment, she wanted to ask him why he had changed cabins and tell him that he was acting like an impetuous child.

But as she stood in line, waiting for bacon and eggs and her third cup of coffee, she heard two of the men talking and turned to Josh with an expression of horror and a blank stare.

'What did they just say?'

'They were talking about Tate.'

'I know. What did they say?' Her face looked ghostly pale. She couldn't have heard right.

'They said it's too bad.'

'What's too bad?' She was trying desperately not to scream.

'That he left yesterday.' Josh smiled pleasantly and moved forward in the line.

'For where?' Her heart began to pound in her ears so loudly, she could barely hear his answers, but he only shrugged before answering this time.

'No one seems to know. His boy over at the Bar Three ought to know though.'

'What the hell do you mean?' She was almost shouting.

'Christ, Sam, take it easy. Tate Jordan. He quit.'

'When?' She thought for a moment that she might faint.

'Yesterday. That was why he stuck around to talk to Bill King. To tell you the truth, yesterday morning he told me he was going to when he asked me to ride for him. He told me he'd been wanting to do it for a long time. He said

it was time to move on.' Josh shrugged. 'Damn shame. He would have been good in Bill King's shoes.'

'So he just left? No two-week notice, no breaking in someone new to do his job for him? That's it?' There were already tears stinging her eyes.

'Yeah, Sam, this ain't Wall Street. When a man wants to move on, he does. He bought himself a truck yesterday morning, put all his stuff in it, and took off.'

'For good?' She could barely choke out the words.

'Sure. Ain't no sense coming back. Never the same if you do. I did it once. It was a mistake. If he was unhappy here, then he done the right thing.' Oh? Did he? How lovely to hear it. And then Josh looked at her more closely.

'You okay, Sam?'

'Yeah. Sure.' But she was terrifying-looking, she was so grey. 'I haven't been sleeping too well lately.' She had to fight back the tears . . . had to . . . besides, there was no reason to panic. Bill King would know where he was, and if he didn't, the boy would. She'd go and see him herself. But she wasn't going to let this man slip through her fingers. Never. And after she found him, he'd never do something like this to her again.

'You know'—Josh was still staring at her—'you looked lousy yesterday too. Think maybe you're getting the flu?'

'Yeah.' She tried to look unaffected by what he had just told her about Tate Jordan. 'Maybe.'

'Then why the hell don't you go back to the big house and climb back into bed?'

She started to resist him and then knew that there was no way she could ride for the next twelve hours, driving herself mad, wondering where Tate had gone. So she nodded vaguely, thanked Josh for the suggestion, and left the main hall. She hurried back to the big house, let herself in through the front door, and then just stood there, as uncontrollable sobs racked her and she dropped to her knees beside a couch and bowed her head in despair. She felt as though she wouldn't survive this second loss in her life, not now, not Tate. As she agonised over what had happened, sobbing uncontrollably into the

couch, she suddenly realised that Caroline was next to her, gently touching her shoulder and then smoothing the tangled blonde hair. Samantha looked up after a few moments, her face red and swollen, her eyes wild, and looked into her friend's eyes to learn what she could there, but Caroline only nodded and cooed gently and took her into her arms and slowly brought her to sit on the couch.

It was fully half an hour before she could speak. Caroline said nothing. She only sat there and rubbed her back gently and waited. There was nothing one could say. It cut her to the core to realise that Sam had come to her to recover from one major loss and had now sustained another. She knew in her gut about Sam and Tate. She had agonised over it the day before when Bill had told her that Tate Jordan had left. But it was too late to stop him, or to discuss it. He had already left when Bill told Caroline in the late afternoon, and all she could think of was how Samantha would take the news. But Caroline hadn't dared to tell her the night before. She had hoped it would wait.

Samantha looked at her then, her face blotched, her eyes hideously bloodshot and swollen, and there was no dissimulation in the look she gave her friend. 'He's gone. Oh, God, Caro, he's gone. And I love him . . .' She couldn't go on then, and Caroline nodded slowly. She understood only too well. She had tried to tell her that here things were different, that there were things that would matter to him that didn't seem important to her.

'What happened, Sam?'

'Oh, God, I don't know. We fell in love at Christmas . . .' She looked around nervously suddenly, wondering if any of the Mexican women were cleaning, but there was no one in sight. 'We went to—' She looked at Caroline in embarrassment. 'We found your cabin and we met there at first, but not often. We weren't snooping—'

'It's all right, Sam.' Caroline's voice was very quiet.

'We just wanted someplace to go and be alone.'

'So did we.' Caroline said it almost sadly.

hands and began to sob again, softly this time, as though her heart were already shattered and there were nothing left.

'What can I do for you, Sam?' There were tears now in Caroline's eyes too. She realised how easily it could have happened to her years earlier, and the conversation Sam had related sounded exactly like an argument that she and Bill had had for years. Eventually they had resolved it differently, but Bill was a good deal less stubborn than Tate. He was also just a shade less noble, a fact for which Caroline was deeply grateful as she sat helplessly and watched the agony of her young friend.

Sam looked at her now, in answer to her question. 'Help me find him. Please, oh, if you could do that . . .'

'How?'

Sam sat back against the couch and sniffed as she thought. 'He'll go to a ranch somewhere. He won't want any other kind of work. How would I get a list of ranches?'

'I can tell you all the ones I know in this area, the men can tell you others. No, let me ask them, we'll cook up some excuse, some reason. Sam'—Caroline's eyes lit up—'you'll find him.'

'I hope so.' She smiled for the first time in hours. 'I won't stop until I do.'

18

By mid-April Sam had contacted sixty-three ranches. At first she had called the ones in the area, looking for Tate, then those farther north, some farther south, then she had begun to call other states. Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, Arkansas, she had even called one in Nebraska that one of the men had suggested. He had talked to Tate about the place and said the food and the pay were real

good. But no one had seen Tate Jordan. Sam left her name and address and Caroline's number and asked them to call her if Tate should appear. She used Caroline Lord's name everywhere and it helped her, and the two pored hourly over directories, wanted ads, listings, advertisements, and the names they got from the men. She had long since asked her office for an extension and had promised them some kind of definitive answer by May 1. If she wasn't coming back to New York, they wanted to know by then. Until then the job would be hers. But she didn't give a damn about her job, all she wanted was Tate Jordan, and he was nowhere to be found. It was as though a month before he had dropped off the face of the earth never to be seen again. He had to be somewhere, Sam knew, but the question was where? It was becoming an obsession with her. She no longer rode with the men, no matter that that began rumours or confirmed their suspicions. From the day that he left she rode with them no more.

She went to the cabin once alone, but couldn't bear it and had ridden home on Black Beauty, her face covered with tears. Now she seldom even rode the big black thoroughbred, even when Caroline encouraged her to do so. All she wanted to do was stay at the house, make phone calls, go over lists, look at maps, write letters, and try to figure out where he was. So far it had all be fruitless, and secretly Caroline was beginning to think that it might stay that way. The truth was that it was a big country, and there were countless ranches. There was always the possibility that he had gone to a different line of work entirely, or that he wasn't using his real name. She was much too familiar with the scores of drifters who had worked on the ranch in the years she had owned it to be able to hold out great hope to Sam. It was entirely possible that he would turn up somewhere, someday, but it was equally possible that he would never be seen or heard from again. It was even possible that he had left the country, gone to Canada or Mexico, or even one of the big ranches in Argentina. Often the ranch owners let men like Tate

work without papers, or with falsified ones, just so they could have them on their ranches. As ranch foremen went, Tate had a long list of good credentials, he was a reliable, hardworking man, and he had a great deal of expertise to offer any ranch. Any ranch owner with half a brain would recognise that, the question was— which ranch owner and which ranch.

By the end of April there was still nothing, and Sam had three days to call her office and tell them where things stood. She had told them a month before that Caroline was ill and it was suddenly difficult for her to leave when she had said she would. They had been understanding at first, but now Charlie was calling. The fun was over. Harvey wanted her back. They were suddenly having big trouble with her automobile client, and if she was coming back at all, then Harvey wanted it to be right now. She couldn't really blame him, but she couldn't tell them either that she was in worse shape now than she had been when she left New York. More than ever, now that he was gone, she knew how much she loved Tate, how much she respected him and his way of life. It was particularly painful to her now when she saw Bill and Caro, and it was agonising for Caroline to share in Samantha's loss.

'Sam.' As she looked at her young friend over coffee on the last day of April, she sighed deeply and decided to tell her what she thought. 'I think you should go back.'

'Where?' She was glancing again at one of her lists of ranches and wondered if Caroline had thought of one they should try again. But Caroline was quick to shake her head.

'I meant New York.'

'Now?' Sam looked shocked. 'But I haven't found any'

Caroline gritted her teeth for what she wanted to say next, much as she hated to hurt Sam. 'You don't know that you ever will.'

'That's a rotten thing to say.' Sam looked at her angrily and pushed away her coffee. She had been very nervous since the whole nightmare had begun. She had not slept, she never ate, she never got any work done. The

only did one thing. She looked for Tate. She had even driven to some of the ranches, and flown briefly to one.

'But it's true, Sam. You have to face the truth now. You may never find him again. I hope like hell that you do, but you can't spend the rest of your life looking for a man who wants to be left alone. Because if you find him, you don't know that you'll be able to convince him that what you think is right and that he's wrong. He thinks that the two of you are too different. It could just be that he's right. And even if he isn't, if this is what he wants, you can't force him to change his mind.'

'What brought this on? Have you been talking about it to Bill?'

'No more than I have to.' Sam knew that he disapproved of her relentless search for Tate. He called it a 'fool manhunt' and thought Sam was wrong to push. 'The man said what he wanted to tell her when he left here, Caro. There's nothing more to say.' But then once he had admitted that if he had done the same thing he hoped she had have tried as hard to find him. 'I just think you sit to face the possibilities, Sam. It's been a month and all.'

So maybe it'll just take a little longer.'

And a little longer . . . and a little longer . . . and a little longer than that. And then what? You spend twenty years looking for a man you barely knew.'

'Don't say that.' Sam looked exhausted as she closed her eyes. She had never worked as hard on any job as she had on the search for Tate. 'I knew him. I know him. Maybe in some ways I knew him too damn well, and that scared him off.'

'It could have.' Caroline agreed. 'But the point is that you can't go on living like this. It'll destroy you.'

'Why should it?' The bitterness in her voice was easy to read. 'Nothing else has.' John and Liz had had their baby, a little girl, and they had even shown her and victorious Liz in the delivery room on the evening news. But Sam didn't care about that anymore either. All she wanted was to find Tate.

'You have to go back, Sam.' Caroline sounded as stubborn as Sam herself.

'Why? Because I don't belong here?' She looked at Caroline angrily, but this time Caroline nodded at what she said.

'That's right. You don't. You belong back in your own world, at your desk, in your office, in your own apartment, with your own things, meeting new people and seeing old friends, being who you really are and not who you pretended to be for a while. Sam'—she reached out and touched her hand—'I'm not tired of having you here. If it were up to me, you could stay forever. But it's not good for you, don't you see that?'

'I don't care. I just want to find him.'

'But he doesn't want you to find him. If he did, he would let you know where he is. He must be taking care that you don't find him, Sam, and if that's true, then you've lost the battle. He could hide from you for years.'

'So you think I should quit. Is that it?'

There was a long silence between them, and then Caroline nodded almost imperceptibly. 'Yes.'

'But it's only been six weeks.' Tears flooded her eyes as she tried to combat the logic of what Caroline had said. 'Maybe if I wait another month—'

'If you do, you won't have a job, and that won't do you any good either. Sam, you need to go back to a normal life.'

'What's normal anymore?' She had almost forgotten. It had been a year since she had been 'happily' married to John Taylor, since she had led a perfectly ordinary life as an advertising executive in Manhattan, married to a man she loved and whom she thought loved her.

'Normal?' She looked at Caroline in horror. 'You must be kidding. I wouldn't know normal anymore if it introduced itself and bit me on the ass!' Caroline laughed at her bleak humour but the look in her eyes didn't waver, and at last Sam sat back in her chair with a long pensive sigh. 'But what the hell am I going to do in New York?'

'Forget all this for a while. It'll do you good. You can always come back.'

'I'd just be running away again if I left here.'
'No, you'd be doing something healthy. This isn't a life for you here, not like this.' It hadn't been since he left.

Sam nodded silently, left the table, and walked slowly back to her room. She placed the call to Harvey Maxwell two hours later and then she went out to the barn and saddled Black Beauty. She rode him for the first time in three weeks that afternoon, riding him headlong into the wind, at full gallop, taking every chance, every jump, every hedge, every stream. Had Caroline seen her, she would have feared for the horse's life, as well as that of her young friend. Had Tate seen her, he would have killed her.

But she was alone now, riding as fast and as hard as she could until she knew that the horse could go no more. She cantered him back to the main compound then and walked him slowly around the corral for half an hour. She knew that she owed that much to the animal, no matter how unhappy she was. And then, when she felt that she had sufficiently walked him and he was cooler, she led him back to his stall and took off the English saddle, stood looking at him for a long time, and then patted his flanks one last time with a whispered, 'Good-bye, old friend.'

19

The plane landed at Kennedy Airport on a glowing spring evening, and Samantha looked down at the city with a blank stare. All she could think of as she unfastened her seat belt was the last she had seen of Caroline at the airport, standing tall and proud next to the old foreman, with tears running down her cheeks as she waved good-bye. Bill had said almost nothing to her as she stood on

tiptoe to kiss his cheek in the crowded terminal, and then suddenly he had squeezed her arm and growled fondly, 'Go on back to New York, Sam, and take care now.' It was his way of saying that he thought she was doing the right thing. But was she? she wondered as she picked up her tote bag and moved into the aisle. Had she been right to come home so soon? Should she have stayed longer? Would Tate have turned up if she'd just waited another month or two? Of course he still might appear, or call from somewhere. Caroline had promised to continue to ask around, and of course if anyone heard from him, she had promised to call Sam. Other than that there was nothing anyone could do. Sam knew that much herself as she sighed deeply and stepped into the airport.

The crowd around her was almost overwhelming, the noise level, the bodies, the confusion. After five months on the ranch she had forgotten what it was like to deal with that many people, to move as quickly as they were moving. She felt totally devoured by the press of people around her as she made her way to the baggage-claim area, feeling like a tourist in her own town and looking appropriately bewildered. There was of course not a single available porter, there were hundreds of people waiting for taxis, and when she finally got one, she had to share it with two Japanese tourists and a plastics salesman from Detroit. When he asked her where she had come from, she was almost too tired to answer, but finally murmured something about California.

'You an actress?' He seemed intrigued as he looked her over, taking in the shining blonde hair and the deep tan. But Sam was quick to shake her head as she looked absentmindedly out of the window.

'No, a ranch hand.'

'A ranch hand?' He stared at her in open disbelief and she turned to look at him with a tired smile. 'This your first time in the big city?' He looked hopeful but she shook her head and did whatever she could to discourage the conversation after that. The two Japanese tourists were chatting animatedly in their own language, and the driver

poke only in curses, darting between lanes of traffic. It was an appropriate re-entry into her city, and as they crossed the bridge from Queens into Manhattan, she looked at the skyline and suddenly wanted to cry. She didn't want to see the Empire State Building and the U.N. and all the other buildings. She wanted to see the big house, the barn, the beautiful redwood trees, and that vast expanse of blue sky. 'Pretty, isn't it?' The perspiring plastics salesman from Detroit moved closer, and Sam only shook her head and edged closer to the door next to where she sat.

'No, not really. Not after what I've seen lately.' She eyed him angrily, as though her return to New York were all his fault. He eyed one of the Japanese girls after that, but she only giggled and went on chattering in Japanese with her friend.

Mercifully the driver dropped Sam off first, and she stood for a long moment on the sidewalk, staring at her house, suddenly afraid to go in, sorry she'd come home, and longing more painfully for Tate than she ever had. What in hell was she doing here in this strange town, all alone, surrounded by all these people, going back to the apartment she had lived in with John? All she wanted was to go back to California, to find Tate, to live and work on the ranch. Why couldn't she have that? Was it so much to ask? she wondered as she unlocked the front door and struggled up the stairs with her bags. No twelve-hour day in the saddle had exhausted her as this one had, with a five-hour plane trip, two meals, a movie, and the emotional shock of coming back to New York. Groaning under the weight of her bags, she dropped them next to her front door on the landing, hunted for her key, fitted it in the lock, and shoved open the front door. The place smelled like the inside of a vacuum cleaner as she stepped inside. It was all there, where she had left it, looking vacant and unloved, and different somehow, as though while she'd been gone all the furniture had subtly altered, shrunk or grown or only slightly changed colour. Nothing looked exactly the same as it had. Yet it was, every bit of it, just as

it had been when she and John had lived there. She felt like an intruder now, or a ghost returning to a scene from her past.

'Hello?' She wasn't even sure why she said it, but when no one answered, she closed the front door and sat down on a chair with a sigh, and then as she looked around, the sobs overtook her, her shoulders shook, and she dropped her face into her hands.

The phone rang insistently twenty minutes later, and she sniffed and blew her nose in a handkerchief and answered the phone, not even sure why she did. After all this time it was obviously going to be a wrong number, unless it was Harvey or Charlie. They were the only two people in New York who knew that she was coming back.

'Yes?'

'Sam?'

'No.' She gave a half-smile through her tears. 'It's a burglar.'

'Burglars don't cry, silly.' It was Charlie.

'Sure they do. There's no colour TV here to rip off.'

'Come over to our place, I'll give you mine.'

'I don't want it.' And then slowly the tears began flowing again, she sniffed loudly and closed her eyes as she tried to catch her breath. 'Sorry, Charlie. I guess I'm not exactly thrilled to be home.'

'Sounds like it. So? Why'd you come back?' He sounded matter-of-fact as he said it.

'Are you crazy? You and Harvey have been threatening murder and mayhem for the last six weeks, and you want to know why I'm here?'

'Okay, so come help us out with your crazy client and then go back. For good, if that's what you want.' Charlie's approach to life was always so damn practical.

'It's not that simple.'

'Why not? Look, Sam, life is very short and can be very sweet if you let it. You're a big girl, you're free now, you should be able to live wherever you want to. If what you want is to run around with a bunch of horses for the rest of your life, then go do it.'

'That simple, huh?'

'Sure. Why not? Tell you what, why don't you just try it out here for a while, kind of like a tourist, see how it feels to you after a couple of months, and if you're not happy . . . hell, Sam, you can always split.'

'You make it all sound so easy.'

'That's how it should be. In any case, pretty lady, welcome back. Even if you don't want to be here, we're happy as hell to have you around.'

'Thanks, love. How's Mellic?'

'Fat, but pretty. The baby's due in another two months, and this one's a girl, I just know it.'

'Sure, Charlie, sure. Haven't I heard that at least two other times?' She smiled at the phone and wiped the tears off her face. It was at least nice to be back in the same town with him again. 'The truth of it is, Mr. Peterson, you only know how to make boy babies. It's all the basketball games you go to, something in the air there gets into your genes.'

'All right, so maybe what I need to do more of in future is go to strip joints. That makes sense . . .' They chuckled together as Sam looked around her at the depressing apartment.

'I thought you were going to water my plants, Charlie.' There was more laughter than reproach in her voice as she gazed at the long-gone wisps of brownish green.

'For five months? You must be kidding. I'll buy you new ones.'

'Don't bother. I love you anyway. Tell me, by the way, how bad things really are in the office, now that you've got me home.'

'Bad.'

'Terrible-bad or just medium-bad?'

'Excruciatingly bad. Another two days and I'd have had an ulcer or killed Harvey. That son of a bitch has been driving me nuts for weeks. The client hasn't liked a single storyboard we've shown them, they think it all looks too prissy, too clean.'

'Didn't you use my horse theme?'

'Hell yes, we've seen every horsey model there is this side of the Mississippi, auditioned every female jockey, every trainer, every—'

'No, no, for chrissake, Charlie. They're right if that's what you're doing. I meant *horses*. Cowboys. You know, macho, sunsets, as in riding into the sunset on a big beautiful stallion . . .' As she said it her mind went instantly to Black Beauty and, of course, Tate. 'That's what you need for those cars. You're not selling a little woman's car, you're selling a low-cost sports car, and they want to give an impression of power and speed.'

'And you don't think a racehorse can do that?'

'Hell no.' She sounded adamant, and at his end he grinned.

'I guess that's why this one's your baby.'

'I'll take a look at what you've got tomorrow.'

'See you then, kid.'

'Give my love to Mellic, Charlie, and thanks for calling.' She hung up and looked around again and sighed, whispering to herself, 'Oh, Tate—why?'

Bit by bit she unpacked her suitcase, dusted things off, tidied up, looked around, and tried to convince herself that this was her home. At ten o'clock she was grateful to climb into bed with a notepad and some memos from Harvey. She wanted to get a head start on what she had to do the next day. It was after twelve o'clock when she set down the notepad, turned off the light, and tried to go to sleep. In the end it took her another two hours, as she lay thinking of the ranch and waiting to hear the familiar sounds that never came.

cowboy, Sam, and plan to go back?' But he was asking her more than she wanted to tell him, so she only shook her head.

'Not really.'

'I'm not sure I like your answer, Sam.' He put down his pipe. 'It's a little vague.'

But Sam spoke to him quietly. 'I came back. You asked me to and I did, maybe that's all we both need to know for now. You let me go away at a time when I needed to do that desperately, much more than I realised at the time. And now you need me, so here I am. I'm here for as long as you need me. I won't run out on you, Harvey. I promise.' She smiled but Harvey Maxwell did not.

'But you think you might go back, Sam?'

'Maybe. I don't know what will happen.' And then with a small sigh she gathered up her things. 'Why don't we just worry about our client right now? What do you think about my ranch themes for the commercials, a cowboy riding along in the twilight or at sunrise, with a herd of cattle behind him . . . a man mounted on a splendid horse, emerging from the landscape, yet at one with his surroundings—'

'Stop!' He held up a hand and grinned. 'You'll make me buy the car. I like it. Work up some storyboards with Charlie and let's see if we can get this show on the road.'

The storyboards that she worked up over the next three weeks with Charlie were the best that any of them had ever seen. What they had on their hands was not only a series of powerful commercials, they had another award-winning campaign. As Sam sat back in her chair after the first client meeting, she looked happy and proud.

'Well, kiddo, you did it.' Charlie threw his arms around her as they waited for Harvey to join them. He had walked the client out to the elevator while Sam and Charlie talked. 'They loved it!'

'They should. Your artwork was stupendous, Charlie.'

'My pleasure.' He grinned and stroked his beard, and a moment later Harvey joined them, beaming for once and waving toward the boards set up around the room. There

were four commercials they had presented, in the hopes of talking the client into one or two. The client had accepted all four.

'Well, children, did we make a successful presentation or did we make a successful presentation?' Harvey couldn't get the grin off his face and Samantha smiled back happily at him. It was one of the first times she had looked happy since she'd come back, but it felt good to be doing something constructive, and to have done it so well.

'When do we start?'

'They want to go into production on it immediately. How soon can you start, Sam? Do we have any locations lined up? Christ, you must know enough ranches to get things rolling. What about the one you've been living on for the last six months?'

'I'll call. But we're going to need three more. And I think'—she mused about it while gnawing her pencil—'I think we're going to want some entirely different locations. Each ranch should be different, special, set apart from the others. We don't just want repeats of the one we shot before.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'The Northwest, the Southwest, the Midwest, California . . . maybe even Hawaii . . . Argentina?'

'Oh, Jesus. I knew it. Well, figure it all out and work it into the budget. We still have to get that past them, but I don't really think we'll have a problem with it. Just do me a favour, start finding locations. It sounds like this may take a little time. And call your friend out at your ranch. At least that will give us one. If we have to, we can start there.' Sam nodded. She knew that this shoot, like countless others, was going to be entirely hers. Now that she was back, Harvey was already talking about retiring again, and she knew that he would leave all the location work to her.

'I may have to fly out and look at some places next week, Harvey. Sound okay to you?'

'That sounds fine.' He left them then, still with a broad smile on his face, and Samantha and Charlie went back

their offices, Samantha to her white-on-white office with chrome and glass desk, beige leather couch and chairs, and lithographs all coordinated in the same white and beige. Charlie's office looked more like an artsy-craftsy attic, cluttered and colourful and amusing, with odd-shaped boxes, huge plants, and funny signs. It looked exactly like an art director's office, one wall was white, one yellow, two were a deep heather blue, and the rug on the floor was dark brown. He had, of course, chosen his own decor. Sam's was part of the general scheme of the whole CHL office, all of it done in soft sand colours and cool textures with modern lines, and not a great deal of soul. But it was restful to work there. She never even saw the decor when she was working, and when she saw clients, she usually met them in one of the conference rooms, or at The Four Seasons for lunch.

She knew when she looked at her watch that it was the wrong time to call Caroline and ask if they could film there. At noon in California Caroline would be out in the hills with Bill and the other men. But she got out the list she had already glanced at that morning in anticipation and began to make phone calls to see what she could do. She knew damn well that she couldn't just pick up the phone and call ranches where she knew no one. She would have to fly out to the areas, then drive around and make her pitch to them in person, asking them if they would allow a commercial to be filmed on the ranch. It usually took weeks to find locations, but she was going to do it right, because she was going to produce the best damn commercials that anyone had ever seen. She was doing it as much for the client now as for herself. It meant a great deal to her to make everything perfect, to make it special and important and striking and effective—and maybe even find Tate. That was a possibility that hadn't escaped her. It wasn't why she had pushed for the concept. The cowboy-on-horseback theme was perfect for the product, but it also could be that while she was travelling and looking for locations, and maybe even while she was out there again for the shooting, maybe someone on one of the

ranches might have heard of Tate. The prospect of finding him was a goal she never lost sight of, and now it loomed larger than ever as she called the travel department and asked them to book her on flights to Phoenix, Albuquerque, Omaha, and Denver, and all during the following week.

'Looking for a location?' the voice asked.

'Yeah.' Sam was already deeply engrossed in the notes on her desk. She had a list of places she wanted to see, most of them concentrated in those four areas, and then of course there was Aunt Caro's ranch.

'Sounds like fun.'

'It should be.' And Sam's eyes began to dance.

21

The phone rang at the Lord ranch at six o'clock that evening as Sam sat in her apartment in a bathrobe, once again looking around at the lifeless decor. She decided as she waited for the phone to be answered that she was going to have to do something about the way the place looked, if she stayed there.

'Hello?' It was Caroline, and Sam immediately broke into a smile.

'Boy, it's good to hear your voice.'

'Sam?' Caroline smiled in answer. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. I'm just working on a crazy project. And aside from wanting to know how you all are, I wanted to ask you a favour, but you have to say no if that's what you want.'

'First tell me how you are, and how it feels to be back. Samantha noticed that Caroline sounded tired, but she put it down to a long day's work and reported in full at her return, how grim the apartment looked, what it felt like to go back to the office, and then her voice became

alive with excitement as she explained about the commercials and her search the following week for other ranches.

'And you know what that means, don't you?' Her voice fairly flew. 'It means that maybe, just maybe, if I get lucky'—she barely dared to do more than whisper—'I could just find Tate. Hell, I'm going to be all over this country.' For a moment, Caroline said nothing.

'Is that why you're doing it, Sam?' Caroline sounded sad for her. She wanted Sam just to forget him. It would be better for her in the end.

'No, it isn't.' She withdrew a little. She had heard the dismay in the older woman's voice. 'But it's why I'm so excited about it. This is a great opportunity for me.'

'I'd say so professionally, in any case. This could be very important for you, if the commercials come out as well as you seem to think they will.'

'I'm hoping they do, which is part of why I called. Aunt Caro, how would you feel about our shooting at the ranch?' It was a candid, open question but there was a moment of silence at the other end.

'Normally, Sam, I'd have loved it. If nothing else, it would give us an excuse to see you. But I'm afraid that right now it's out of the question.' There was a catch in her voice as she said it, and Sam frowned. 'Is something wrong, Aunt Caro?'

'Yes.' A little sob shook her, but she pulled herself together quickly. 'No, really, I'm all right. Bill had a little heart attack last week. Nothing major. He's already back from the hospital, and the doctor says that it's nothing to be unduly alarmed about, but . . .' Suddenly fresh sobs shook her. 'Oh, Sam, I thought if something happened . . . I don't know what I'd do. I couldn't live without him.' It was the first time that they had faced that, and she was terrified now that she'd lose him. 'I just couldn't go on if something happened to Bill.' She sobbed softly into the phone.

'My God, why didn't you call me?' Samantha looked stunned.

'I don't know, it all happened so quickly. And I stayed

before she hung up, she called out to her old friend, 'I love you, Aunt Caro.'

'I love you too, Sam dear.' And now they were bound in a common secret, the lives of women who loved ranch hands, who had to live shackled by the insane rules of courtship peculiar to ranch hands and ranchers. And now that Caroline had almost lost her beloved foreman, she suddenly knew how great was Sam's pain.

22

For ten days Sam flew from the Midwest to the Southwest, and then up north again, and only Caroline's insistence that Bill was so much better kept her away from California as well. In each place she stopped she rented cars, stayed at small motels, drove hundreds of miles, and spoke to every conceivable rancher she could lay her hands on, and for her own purposes she spoke to the ranch hands as well. For the purposes of Crane, Harper, and Laub, at the end of ten days she had just what she needed, four splendid ranches, each one totally different, surrounded by varied but always majestic countryside. They were all settings that would make extravagantly beautiful commercials. But for her own purposes, again and again Sam struck out. And as she flew back to New York her sense of victory at having found what she had wanted was vastly outweighed by her depression over not finding Tate. She had called Caroline from her hotel room every evening, inquired about Bill, and then told her who she had talked to, what they had said, and pondered for another hundred times what might have happened to Tate, where he might have gone, which direction he might have taken. By now she had spoken to so many ranchers since he had vanished three months before that she felt certain that if someone

were too pretty, one looked more like a ballet dancer than a cowboy. In the end, after four weeks of looking, she found her man, and it was a good thing. The shoot was only two weeks away, scheduled for July fifteenth.

The man they chose was actually English, but his Western accent was so perfect that no one would have known. For years he had been a Shakespearean actor at Stratford-on-Avon, and two years before he had decided to come to New York and start doing commercials, because he was tired of demanding roles with too little pay. Now he was advertising soft drinks, men's underwear, and a line of tools in national commercials that were paying him a handsome wage. He had shoulders from one side of the room to the other, a handsome angular face that was good-looking but not too pretty, deep blue eyes, and dark reddish-brown hair. He looked totally the part, and every man in America would want to identify with him and their wives would dream of the car being advertised, in the hopes that the cowboy in the commercial might somehow appear at the wheel. He was exactly what they needed for the commercial, and the only thing that amused Samantha, as she told Charlie, was that their new Western hero was decidedly gay.

'Does he look it?' Charlie looked worried.

'Hell no, he's an actor. And he is gorgeous!'

'Well, do yourself a favour, don't fall in love with him.'

'I'll try not to.' But the best part was that she liked him. His name was Henry Johns-Adams, and if nothing else he would be good company on the trip. He was extremely well-read, terribly polite, very cultured, and he seemed to have a good sense of humour as well. It would be a real relief from some of the self-centred, undisciplined egomaniacs she had had along on other shoots. 'You coming west with us, Charlie?'

'I don't know, Sam. I hate to leave Mellic. If she has the baby by then, it'll be okay. If not, I may have to send two of my assistants. Can you manage?'

'If I have to.' And then with a gentle smile, 'How's she feeling?'

The exhausted fell on Monday. But I have not and it's almost over. The baby's due at the end of next week.

"What are you going to name him?" She hadn't got off her back about it being a boy again.

"Sam. And you'll see. We're not telling what we're going to name her. It's a surprise this time."

"Come on, tell me, Charlie. Charlotte, if it's a girl?" She loved to tease him and he pinched her behind as he shook his head and disappeared.

As it turned out, Mellie had the baby that weekend, a week early for a change and a girl this time, finally. The surprise was that they named her Samantha. When Charlie told her in the office on Tuesday after the Fourth of July weekend, there were tears in Sam's eyes.

"Do you mean it?"

"Sure I do. Want to come see her?"

"Are you kidding? I'd love to. Mellie's not too tired?"

"Hell no. The fourth one's easy. It sounds disgusting but she walked out of the delivery room. Freaked me out, but the doctor said it was okay."

"It makes me feel nervous just hearing about it." Like all women who have never had children, Samantha was amazed by the entire process and the whole mystique.

They went to the hospital together at lunchtime, and Mellie looked happy and healthy and glowing in a lace-trimmed pink bathrobe, with pink satin slippers, a huge grin on her face, and the tiny pink and white baby nestled in her arms. For a long moment Sam said absolutely nothing. She just stood and stared at the delicate bundle, her eyes riveted to the baby's face.

"She's so beautiful, Mellic." Sam said it in a whisper, in tones of awe, and Charlie chuckled from where he stood just behind her.

"Yeah. But we would have named her Samantha even if she'd been ugly." Sam turned around and made a face at him. It dispelled the enormity of the moment, and Sam's sudden longing for what she could never have, the miracle of childbirth, and her own child. Lately she had seldom let

her thoughts wander in that direction, but for the time in a long time, as she stood there gazing down at the new baby, she felt her heart ache for the lost dream.

'Want to hold her?' Melinda looked lovelier than she had ever seen her. There was a kind of quiet glow that seemed to emanate from the very depths of her soul, and at the same time envelop the baby as it lay precious and protected in its mother's arms.

'I don't think so.' Sam shook her head and sat down at a corner of the bed, her eyes still riveted to the small baby. 'I'd be afraid to break her.'

'They're tougher than they look.' It was the cliché of every mother. 'Here . . . try it.' Without warning Melinda dropped the baby into Sam's arms and settled her there. They all watched the baby stretch, curl herself up and then smile. She was sound asleep as she lay there. Sam could feel the baby's warmth in her arms.

'She's so tiny!'

'No, she's not!' Mellie laughed. 'She weighs eight and a half pounds!'

But a moment later the brand-new Samantha discovered that she was hungry and awake, looking for her mother, with a wowl. The elder Samantha returned to the safety of Melinda, and a few minutes later she saw Charlie went back to the office, as Samantha felt how much was missing in her life. It was one of those times when the fact that she was sterile weighed on her like a boulder on her guts.

And then, as she stopped in the doorway of her office, she remembered and called out to Charlie. 'Does that mean you're coming west with me?'

He nodded, smiling. 'I would have had to anyway.'

'How come?' She looked surprised.

'Just to be sure you don't rape our cow-boy!'

'Not likely.' She grinned at him and disappeared from her office. The agony of seeing the baby subsided a little, though it didn't leave her completely for the rest of the day.

'Everybody ready?' Charlie looked at them with a broad grin, and then bowed at the entourage and waved them onto the airplane. They were travelling on a commercial airline to Arizona, but there were so many of them, it seemed as though they had bought out most of first class. There were seven people from the production company, and in addition Sam, Charlie, their two assistants, Henry Johns-Adams—the English actor—and his friend. To add to the mountain of luggage and equipment and miscellaneous crates and boxes, Henry and his roommate had brought along their dog, a tiny white poodle named Georgie, which Samantha prayed would not manage to dart underneath the feet of any horses. If it did, it was so little that it would probably be all over, and most likely so would the shoot.

In addition they were being met in Arizona by a makeup person and a hairdresser, both of whom had been working in L.A. and would continue on with the group from Crane, Harper, and Laub for the rest of the trip.

'Think they got all our luggage?' Henry's friend whispered to Samantha nervously, and she convinced him that it was assuredly all on the plane. 'But there's so much.'

'They're used to it. Besides'—she smiled reassuringly—'this is first class.' As though that made a difference, as though they wouldn't just as easily lose one of his matched Vuitton suitcases as they would one of the crew's pieces of Samsonite luggage or one of the zillion-dollar pieces of equipment. And once again she realised what a great deal of work she'd have on this journey. Having thought up the concept, almost completely written the ads herself, found the locations, cast the leading man, organised the troupes, selected the production house and approved their bid

what she was going to do now, for the next two weeks, in four different locations, was reassure everyone that they would be fed soon, it would only take a few more takes, the weather would be cooler tomorrow, the air conditioning in the hotel would be repaired by noon, and the food couldn't possibly be this bad in the next town. And having a nervous gay boyfriend and a French poodle along wouldn't help anything. On the other hand Henry Johns-Adams had already proved to be even tempered, amusing, and a good sport, and Sam was hopeful that he would keep both his lover and his pet in line. She didn't mind his being gay, but she was a little uptight about having him bring his little entourage. Nonetheless, he had insisted, and they wanted him badly enough to have brought his mother and fourteen of his dearest friends.

The drinks on the plane helped everyone's nerves and their spirits. Charlie was in grand form and entertained them all, and finally, half an hour out of Tucson, they all relaxed. They had no work to do that day. They were going to drive a hundred and fifty miles to their location, in three rented station wagons, with all the equipment, and then they'd all have a good dinner and a good night's sleep and get to work bright and early the next day. Sam's ranch hours were about to stand her in good stead, because she figured that she'd be up every morning by four thirty. And every night, for an hour or two after work, she had a plan. She had already made up the list of additional people she wanted to talk to, and after working on whichever ranch all day, she'd hang out with the ranch hands for a while and just chat. Maybe one of them had worked with Tate somewhere, maybe one of them would know a link—a relative, an old employer, someone who might know where he was by now. It was worth a try. Anything was. As the plane lowered its landing gear Samantha smiled to herself, feeling hopeful. You never knew, maybe one of these days she would walk onto a ranch, look up at a tall handsome cowboy leaning against a fence post, and it wouldn't be a stranger this time. It would be Tate, with those green eyes, and the gentle

much of Henry's friend, looked with horror at the hairdresser's flaming-red hair with the little blue punk fringe across the front, and scowled horribly at 'them ugly brown bags.' Henry's friend almost caressed his beloved Vuitton and threatened to sleep in the car if he had to, but he was not leaving the dog. A hundred-dollar bill, which would appear on the expense account as tips and miscellaneous, helped grease the way for Georgie to stay in the hideous turquoise vinyl splendour of the hotel too.

'You look beat, Sam.' Charlie sprawled on a couch in her room and watched her pore over a sheet of notes on a clipboard. She looked up with a grin and threw a crumpled ball of paper that hit his left ear.

'You must be kidding. Me? Why would I look tired? I'm just dragging around the country with a bunch of eccentrics and a French poodle. Why should I be tired, Charlie?'

'I'm not tired.' He looked virtuous and she made a face.

'No wonder. You never work.'

'That's not my fault. I'm only the art director, here to make sure that the film is artistically beautiful. It's not my fault you're an ambitious bitch and you want to be C.D.' He had only been kidding, but suddenly Sam looked serious as she sat down on the bed.

'Is that what you think, that I want to be C.D.?''

'No, my love.' He smiled gently at her. 'I don't really think that's what you want. But I think it's what you'll get. You're damn good at what you do. In fact, much as I hate to admit it, sometimes you're brilliant. And Harvey knows it, and the clients know it, and I know it, and everyone in the business knows it, and sooner or later you're going to get yours. Either someone will hire you away at a salary even you can't resist, or Harvey will retire, as he keeps threatening to do, and you'll wind up the C.D.' Creative Director... it was an awesome thought.

'I don't think that's what I want. Not anymore.'

'Then you better do something about it while you still can, before it just comes at you and happens and it's too

en, after he thought about it for a moment, 'What do you want, Sam?'

She looked at him for a long time and then signed softly, 'Oh, Charlie, that's a long story.'

'I had a feeling it would be.' His eyes didn't waver from hers. 'There was someone in California, wasn't there? On the ranch?' She nodded. 'So what happened?'

'He left me.'

'Oh, shit.' And right after John too. No wonder she had looked so rigid and unhappy when she had come back. 'For good?'

'I don't know. I'm still looking for him.'

'Don't you know where he is?' She shook her head, and he looked sad for her. 'What are you going to do?'

'Keep looking.' She said it with quiet determination and he nodded.

'Good girl. You're a strong lady, you know that, Sam?'

'I don't know, love.' She smiled and sighed again. 'Sometimes I have my doubts.'

'Don't.' He looked at her almost proudly. 'I don't think there's anything you couldn't pull through. Remember that, kiddo, if the going ever gets too rough.'

'Remind me.'

'I will.' They exchanged a warm smile and Sam was glad that he had come with her, he was the best friend she had, and it made the trip more fun to have him to joke with and laugh at and talk to, and behind all the clowning, there was a warm and intelligent man. It pleased her, too, to know that she had his respect and Harvey's. At first when she had come back from her months on the ranch, she had been aware that she was having to prove herself again, not only as assistant creative director, but as a person, as their friend. And now, in such a short time, she knew that she was back in the circle of their respect and affection. That meant a lot to her, and she stood up and went over to kiss Charlie on the cheek.

'You haven't told me anything about my namesake lately.'

'She's great. Brushing her teeth, tap dancing, doing the laundry.'

'Oh, shut up, you jerk. I'm serious. How is she?'

'Cute as a button. Girls sure are different from boys.'

'You're very observant, dear. By the way, are you hungry yet? I'm starving, and we have to shepherd all our little darlings to dinner at the taco joint down the street or they're going to bitch and moan.'

'That's what you're giving them for dinner? Tacos?' He looked shocked. 'I'm not sure little Mr. Vuitton will like that, not to mention the poodle.'

'Don't be nasty. Beside, in this town I doubt if there's anything else to eat.'

'Wonderful.'

But as it turned out, they all had a marvellous time, eating tacos, drinking beer, and telling jokes that got increasingly raunchy as they got more and more relaxed and more tired, and eventually the whole group went back to the hotel and went to bed. Charlie waved a last good night to Sam as he disappeared into his room, and she spent another half hour going over her notes to herself for the next day, and then, yawning, she turned off the light.

24

It was six o'clock the next morning when they got together for breakfast. And seven thirty when they finally made it to the ranch. They had decided not to shoot at sunrise on the first day, but to settle for full day shots, and eventually try for a sunset. But it was almost noon by the time everything was set up to the film crew's satisfaction and they were fully rolling with Henry Johns-Adams riding a good-looking black mare, which made Samantha long for Caroline's Thoroughbred stallion. This was no Black Beauty Henry was riding, but she was a pretty horse and

stop. They were filming at a ranch in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and Sam had just interviewed the last of the foremen and hung out for almost an hour with some of the ranch hands who had come by to watch them film. She knew now that if she found Tate it wouldn't be this time, and they were going home the next day, so once again her hopes had been dashed. She would go back to New York, and wait, and try again someday when she was near a ranch. And maybe, maybe, one day she would find him. Maybe. If.

As she stood looking at the mountains for a moment, she heard one of the men tell another that she had worked on the Lord Ranch in California. They knew of it, and the second cowboy looked her over with an appraising glance.

'Yeah?' She nodded. 'I figured you knew horses, but I didn't know how. I saw you riding this morning. You got a good seat, good hands.'

'Thank you.' She smiled at him, but her sorrow had somehow crept into her eyes now. She looked tired and deflated and the man looked her over, wondering why she looked so down at the mouth.

'You see our new stallion?' he asked her, chewing on a wad of tobacco. 'Got him last week. He's out in the far barn.'

'Could I see him?' Sam asked him the question more to be pleasant than because she had any real desire to see the stallion. She wanted to get back to the tiny motel where they were staying, wrap it all up, and get ready to go home the next day. For her, there was nothing left to stick around for. They had done the shoot, and she hadn't found Tate. But trying to look interested, she trudged after the old cowboy, and when she reached the barn beside him, she wasn't sorry she had come. What she saw in front of her was one of the biggest stallions she had ever seen, grey with a black mane and a black tail and a long white star on his forehead that seemed to make his eyes look even wilder as he pawed the ground. 'My God, he's a beauty.'

'Ain't he?' The ranch hand looked pleased. 'He's a little

devil in him that she had seen in Black Beauty, and he seemed to be almost bursting from his skin, aching to be allowed to run free. 'He's a little fresh. Go easy with him in the beginning . . . Miss . . . ' He hunted for her name.

'Sam.' She smiled easily, suddenly anxious to get on the huge grey horse. He was even bigger than Black Beauty, and suddenly it was as though she could sense Tate beside her, shouting at her as he had about Caro's black stallion, trying to force her to ride horses like Lady and Rusty. She grinned to herself. Hell, he had left her. She could ride anything she wanted to now. And as she thought of it the full pain of having lost him ripped through her once again; she took the leg up the old ranch hand gave her, pulled the reins taut, and let the huge grey stallion dance her around. She didn't let him get out of hand, and his two efforts to toss her were fruitless, much to the old man's delight.

Slowly she walked past the big barn, toward the old corral. By then several of the men had seen her, at first they watched with interest, and then they began to cheer as they saw how she controlled the prancing grey beast. As though everyone nearby suddenly sensed an intriguing performance, they turned to watch Samantha as she rode Grey Devil through the ranch's main compound, past her crew, and Charlie, and Henry and his friend and the poodle; and then sensing her own passion for horses and the countryside surge within her, she forgot them all and began cantering out into the fields beyond. She cantered for only a few moments and then she gave him what he wanted, letting him free to gallop at his own speed, racing until it felt as if he were flying, his hooves beating hard on the ground. As Sam rode Grey Devil she was smiling, with the wind on her face and her heart pounding as they rode along. Riding this horse was like waging a special kind of battle, against the horse's strength and his mind, with only her capabilities and her skill on her side. But she was an even match for Grey Devil, and although several times he tried to throw her, he didn't succeed, and she felt all the tension and anguish and disappointment of not finding Tate well up within her, and she began to press Grey

Devil forward, urging him to go even faster than he had before. She would beat him at his own game, if she could.

It was then that the crowd watching grew silent. Until then she had been a beautiful sight to see, her golden hair stretched out behind her, in sharp contrast to the black mane and tail of Grey Devil, as they flew across the fields. She moved as one with the giant stallion, her every muscle in tune with his. But now one of the ranch hands jumped off the fence to stop her, several others caught their breath, and the foreman shouted, as though she could hear him. But it was already too late. There was a hidden narrow stream out in the field she had just sailed into. It was narrow enough to jump with ease if she saw it, but it was also very deep, and if the horse stumbled, she would be thrown into a rocky ravine. The foreman was running now, waving wildly, and Charlie saw him and began running too. It was as though both men knew what was coming, but at precisely that moment they saw her. The stallion stopped dead as he reached the stream he had seen before Sam did, and Samantha, unprepared, flew through the air with a wild, fearful grace, hair fanned out, arms extended, until she silently disappeared.

As Charlie saw it happen he ran for the station wagon, turned the key in the ignition, shoved it into gear, and surged forward—he didn't give a damn who he ran down. It was too far to run. He signalled wildly to the foreman, who hopped in, and drove off with the tyres screeching on the gravel and then bumping terribly as they crossed the fields. Charlie made horrible guttural sounds as he muttered to himself, praying all the way. 'What's over there?' he asked the foreman, without taking his eyes off the field. He was going almost sixty, and Grey Devil had flashed past him only moments earlier, hell-bent on the barn. 'A ravine.' The foreman looked tense as he answered, straining to see what was ahead. They could still see nothing and a moment later he shouted 'Stop!' which Charlie did, and the foreman led the way through the grass, down a little incline to where Grey Devil had balked at the stream. At first they saw absolutely nothing, and

then Charlie saw her, her white shirt almost torn from her body, her chest and her face and her hands lacerated almost beyond recognition, her hair fanned out around her, as she lay there broken, bleeding, and terribly, terribly still.

'Oh, my God . . . oh, my God . . .' Charlie began crying as he rushed toward her, but the foreman was already kneeling beside her, with two fingers pressed gently to the side of her neck.

'She's still alive. Get in the car, go back to the house, call for the sheriff, tell him to bring the helicopter out here right away. And if he can get one, bring a paramedic, or a doctor, or a nurse.' The town of Steamboat Springs was not heavily endowed with medical personnel suited to the occasion. It was obvious from the position in which she lay, Sam had probably broken several bones, and possibly even her neck or her back. 'Go on, man, get going!' he shouted at Charlie, who wiped his face on his sleeve and ran back to the car, shot back a little distance, turned around, and pounded on the accelerator, wondering frantically if Samantha would live. 'Fucking horse,' he was shouting to himself as he drove back to where the others waited tensely. And then he jumped out of the car and gave orders.

He went back to Sam then and knelt beside her, trying to hold her and staunch the flow of blood from the cuts on her face with a towel he'd found in the car. And when he got into the helicopter beside her twenty minutes later, his face was grim. The two assistants were left to wrap up with the others. They were all to meet him in the hospital in Denver later that night.

It seemed to take forever for the helicopter to reach Denver, and by the time it did, it was obvious that Samantha's life was in grave danger. A paramedic had travelled with them, and for the last ten minutes of the trip he had given her artificial respiration as Charlie had sat anxiously by. He was aching to ask the paramedic if he thought she would make it, but he was afraid, so he said nothing and just watched them and continued to pray.

silently down his face. There was nothing they could tell him, they just didn't know.

It was an hour and a half later when they came back to find Charlie sitting frozen like a lost child in a waiting-room chair. He hadn't moved, he hadn't smoked, he hadn't even had a cup of coffee. He had just sat there, waiting, barely daring to breathe himself.

'Mr. Peterson?' Someone had taken his name when they had asked him to sign the admission forms. He had continued to claim that he was her brother, and he didn't give a damn if he lied, if it helped her, not that he was sure what difference it made.

'Yes?' He sprang to his feet. 'How is she? Is she all right?' Suddenly he couldn't stop talking, but the doctor nodded very slowly and looked Charlie full in the face.

'She's alive. Barely.'

'What is it? What happened?'

'To put it simply, Mr. Peterson, her back is broken. Her spine is fractured in two places. Bones are shattered. There's a hairline fracture in her neck, but we can work around that. The problem right now is her spine. There are so many small broken bones, we have to operate in order to take off some of the pressure. If we don't, there could be permanent damage to her brain.'

'And if you do?' Charlie had instantly sensed that the sword had two edges.

'If we do, she may not live.' The doctor sat down and indicated to Charlie to do the same. 'The problem is that if we don't, I can almost guarantee you that she'll be a vegetable for the rest of her life, and probably a quadriplegic.'

'What's that?'

'Entirely paralysed. That means she'd have no control of her arms and legs, but could possibly move her head.'

'And if you do operate, that won't be the case?' Charlie suddenly felt a desperate urge to throw up, but he fought it. What in God's name were they discussing here, like buying carrots and onions and apples, move her head or her legs or . . . Jesus Christ!

he doctor was careful with his explanation. 'Mainly never walk again, Mr. Peterson, but if operate, we might salvage the rest of her. At best, she'd end up a paraplegic, with no use of the lower half of her body. But if we're lucky, we can save her mind. She might not be a vegetable if we go in now.' He hesitated at an interminable moment. 'The risk is much greater. She's in bad shape, and we could lose her. I can't make you any promises.'

'All or nothing, isn't it?'

'More or less. In all fairness I should tell you to do nothing for her, or if we do everything she might not live through the night. She's in a bad condition.' Charlie nodded slowly, suddenly realizing that it was his decision and feeling desolate that it was. He knew Sam had family still alive gone this far, and besides, she was close to anybody . . . Oh, poor sweet Sam.

'You want an answer from me, Doctor?'

The man in the white coat nodded. 'I do.'

'When?'

'Right now.'

But how do I know you're any good, Charlie asked him. What choice do you have? and Not to operate meant that Sam would be nothing left but a lot of blonde body, no mind, no heart, no soul—thought. To operate meant they might lose her if she lived, she'd still be Sam. In a way, it was Sam.

'Go ahead.'

'Mr. Peterson?'

'Operate. Operate, dammit . . . ' Charlie shouted and as the doctor hurried and began to pound the wall. It was then that he went to buy himself cigarettes. He huddled in a corner, like a frightened animal at the clock. One hour . . . two hours . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . . At two

the doctor returned to find him wide-eyed and terrified and almost green with anguish as he waited, convinced that by now Sam must have died. She had died and no one had told him. And he had never been so frightened in his life. He had killed her with his lousy goddamn decision. He should have told the man not to operate, should have called her ex-husband, God, her mother . . . He didn't even begin to think of the consequences of his decision. The doctor had wanted an answer . . .

'Mr. Peterson?'

'Hm?' He looked at the man as though he were in a trance.

'Mr. Peterson, your sister is all right.' He gently touched his arm, and Charlie nodded. He nodded again, and then the tears came, and then suddenly he was clasping the doctor tightly in his arms.

'My God . . . my God . . .' was all he could whimper. 'I thought she was dead . . .'

'She's all right, Mr. Peterson. Now you should go home and get some rest.' And then he remembered that they were all New Yorkers. 'Do you have a place to stay?' Charlie shook his head and the doctor jotted the name of a hotel on a piece of paper. 'Try that.'

'What about Sam?'

'I can't tell you much. You know the stakes we were playing for. We reconnected as much as we could. Her neck will be fine. Her spine . . . well, you knew . . . she will be a paraplegic. I'm almost sure there was no brain damage, neither from the fall, nor from the pressure before we operated. But we just have to wait now. It was a very long operation.' One could see that much on his face. 'We'll just have to wait.'

'How long?'

'We'll know a little more every day. If she makes it until tomorrow, we'll have much better odds.'

Charlie looked at him then, realising something. 'If she . . . if she lives, how long will she be here? Before we can take her back to New York?'

'Ohh . . .' The doctor exhaled slowly, staring at the

ground as he thought, and then looked back into Charlie's face. 'That really is hard to say. I would say though that if she does exceptionally well we could move her in an ambulance sometime in the next three or four months.'

Three or four months? 'And then?' He dared to say the words.

'It really is too soon to even think about all this,' the doctor chided, 'but you're looking at at least a year in the hospital, Mr. Peterson. If not more. She's going to have to make a lot of readjustments.' Charlie shook his head slowly, only beginning to comprehend what lay in store for Sam. 'But first, let's just get her through tonight.' He left Charlie then, sitting alone in a corner of the waiting room waiting for the others to arrive from Steamboat Springs.

They got there at three thirty in the morning, found Charlie asleep, hunched over with his head on his chest and snoring softly, and they woke him to hear the news. He told them what he knew, and there was sober silence among the others, and then quietly they left together to find a hotel. When they got there, Charlie sat staring in agony out of the window at Denver, and it was only when

Henry and his friend came to sit with him, that at last he let it all go, all the pain and the terror and the worry and the guilt and the confusion and the sorrow, and he sobbed for over an hour as Henry held him in his arms. And from that moment on, as they sat with him through the night and brought him solace, they were his friends. It was the darkest night that Charlie could ever remember, but when they called the hospital in the morning, it was Henry who dropped his face in his hands and cried. Samantha was still alive.

The day after Sam's accident the entire crew disbanded, but after several long phone conversations with Harvey, Charlie opted to stay. He didn't know how long he'd have to be there, and he couldn't leave Mellie alone with four kids forever, but right now he knew he wasn't leaving. She was alone in a strange city, and she was almost half dead. Harvey had been stunned when he had heard the news. It had been easy for Charlie to convince him to let him stay. But Harvey had also suggested that Charlie at least try to contact Sam's mother in Atlanta. She was, after all, Sam's only living relative, and she had a right to know that her only child was in intensive care in Denver with a broken back. But when Charlie called her, he discovered that she and her husband were on vacation for a month in Europe, so there was nothing more he could do. He knew anyway that Sam wasn't overly fond of her mother, thought her stepfather was a horse's ass, and her father had been dead for years. There was no one else to call. By then of course though, he had called Mellie, and she had cried like a baby at the news. 'Oh, poor Sam . . . oh, Charlie . . . how will she do it . . . in a wheelchair . . . and all alone . . . !' They had cried for a few moments together, and then Charlie had got off the phone. He wanted to put another call in to Harvey, because he had wanted him to check on the doctor who did the operation, even though by now it was more than a little late. But he was relieved when he got back to Harvey. Harvey had called every bone man he knew in Boston, New York, and Chicago, he had even called a friend who was the chief orthopaedic surgeon for the Mets.

'Thank God for your social connections, Harvey. Anyway, what did he say?'



'Yeah. Anyway, it doesn't matter. That's all over.'

'Why am I here?'

'So you can recover.' They were still whispering, and he smiled at her and ever so gently took her hand. He had never been so happy to see her as he was right now.

'Can I go home?' She sounded sleepy and childlike as she closed her eyes again.

'Not just yet.'

'When? Tomorrow?'

'We'll see.' Tomorrow . . . it would be several hundred tomorrows, but Charlie couldn't bring himself to feel sorry. He was just so damn glad that she had made it. She was alive, and she was conscious—that had to be a good sign.

'You didn't call my mother, did you?' She eyed him suspiciously and he quickly shook his head.

'Of course not.' He lied.

'Good. Her husband is an ass.'

Charlie grinned at her, thrilled with the soft patter of conversation, and then the nurse appeared at the window and gave him the sign.

'I have to go now, Sam. But I'll come back tomorrow. Okay, babe?'

'Okay.' She smiled sweetly at him, closed her eyes, and went back to sleep. And when Charlie went back to the hotel, he called Mellie and told her that Sam had regained consciousness at last.

'What does that mean?' She still sounded desperately worried, but he was buoyant with the news.

'I don't know, love. But right now it sure feels good. I thought . . . I thought maybe we had lost her.'

Mellie nodded at her end. 'So did I.'

* * *

He stayed in Denver with her for another two weeks, and then both Mellie and Harvey started making noises about his coming home. He knew he had to, and he missed Mellie and the kids terribly, but he just hated to leave

been two weeks. But she's less groggy now, she's more alert, eventually she'll put two and two together, and when she figures out that she'll never walk again, it's going to be very traumatic for her. I'd like to have you here.'

'Or her there. What do you think?'

'Can your firm charter a plane? Would they do it?'

'Yes.' He had called Harvey that morning and Harvey had told him to spare no expense. 'A nurse, a doctor, any kind of machinery you want. You run the show, we'll pay the bills.'

'All right,' the doctor said thoughtfully, 'all right, if her condition stays stable for the next few days, I'll make the arrangements for you and we'll fly her to New York this weekend.'

'You'll come too?' Charlie crossed his fingers and the doctor nodded. 'Hallelujah! Thank you, Doctor!' The doctor grinned, and Charlie hurried to tell Sam.

'You're going home, kid.'

'I am? I can leave?' She looked both startled and thrilled. 'But what about my barbecue? Won't they charge us a lot for excess baggage?' Although she was joking, he saw that she looked nervous at the prospect of leaving. She was beginning to understand just how much danger she had been in and that she wasn't totally out of the woods yet. The only thing she really didn't understand was about her legs. But she would. Charlie still cringed at the thought. As long as she was still in the cast, she wouldn't figure it out.

'No sweat—you should pardon the pun,' he said, grinning. 'We're taking the barbecue with us. Harvey says we can charter our own plane.'

'But, Charlie, that's crazy. Can't they just set me up with crutches or something, or if worse comes to worst, stick me in a wheelchair with my stupid body cast and let me fly home on the plane?'

'Only if you want to give me heart failure. Look, Sam, the truth is you kicked the shit out of yourself, so now why take chances? Why not go home in style? I mean, if you're



face itched terribly now that all the scabs were healing and dropping off.

'Christ, Charlie, I look like a goddamn monster!' She sounded irritated for the first time since she'd been there, and when he came into the room, he thought her eyes looked red.

'I don't think so. I think you look gorgeous. So what else is new?'

'Nothing.' But she sounded sullen, and he watched her carefully as he toured casually around the room. She was no longer in intensive care, but had a small room, almost entirely swallowed up by the bed, and in the corner was a table covered with flowers, from Henry and his lover, Jack, the rest of the crew, another bunch from Harvey, and still more from Mellie and him.

'Want to hear some of the office dirt?'

'No.' She lay in her cast and closed her eyes, and he watched her, praying that she wasn't getting sick. It seemed a long time before she opened them again. And when she did, she looked angry, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes again.

'What's up, babe? Come on, tell Papa.' He sat down in a chair next to the bed and took her hand.

'The night nurse . . . the one with the funny red wig . . . ' The tears slowly spilled over. 'She said that when I go home . . . ' Sam gulped down a sob and squeezed his hand, and as she did it Charlie was grateful that she could. 'She said I'm not going home . . . that I'm just going to another hospital . . . in New York . . . oh, Charlie,' she wailed like a small child, 'is that true?' He looked at her, wanting to hug her, like one of his children, but there was no way to put one's arms around the huge plaster cast or her surrounding machine, all he could do was hold her hand and gently touch her face. He knew he had to tell her the truth.

'Yeah, babe, that's true.'

'Oh, Charlie, I want to go home.' She sobbed in anguish and then winced at the pain.

'Don't do that, silly, you'll hurt yourself, but it's all

right to cry. Just keep it down.' He tried to tease her, but inside he was sad at what was happening. For Sam, it was the beginning of a long, difficult road she had only just begun to travel. Her old life had ended in the flash of an instant, at the feet of a grey horse. 'Come on, Sam, just getting back to New York would be a step in the right direction, wouldn't it?'

'I guess so.'

'Sure it would.'

'Yeah, but I want to go home. I don't want to go to hospital.'

'Well'—he grinned at her lopsidedly—'at least we know you're not crazy. But okay, so you have to go to a hospital for a while, so what? I'll be able to visit you, and Mellic and Harvey and whomever else you want . . .'

'Not my mother!' Sam rolled her eyes and laughed through her tears. 'Oh, shit, Charlie, why did this have to happen?' The smile faded, and the tears began in earnest. For a long time he just sat there and held and then he said the only thing he knew to tell

you, Sam. We all do. And we're right here with

re such a good friend, and I love you too.' It made more, but the nurse arrived then with her lunch. 'Are you're leaving us, Miss Taylor. Is that true?' 'I'm trying to.' She smiled at Charlie. 'But I'll be back. my own steam next time, just to visit!'

'I'm hope so.' The nurse smiled and left the room, as suddenly Charlie breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment he'd been terrified that the nurse would give something when Sam said 'under my own steam.'

So, she looked at Charlie, sipping some soup, 'when we going home?'

'Does Saturday suit you, or do you have other plans?' She grinned at her, immensely pleased. She was trying to tell God, she was trying.

'No, Saturday sounds okay to me.' She was smiling at him, and he couldn't help thinking that the

doctor had been right. When she was ready to know something, she would. He just wondered when she would be ready to face the rest. 'Yeah, Saturday sounds just fine. What hospital am I going to, Charlie?'

'I don't know. Do you care?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'I'll find out.'

'Try for Lenox Hill. It's in a nice neighbourhood, and it's near the subway. That way everyone I want to see will be able to come visit.' She smiled softly. 'Maybe even Mellic.' And then, 'Do you think she could bring the baby?'

There were tears in Charlie's eyes when he nodded. 'I'll sneak her in under my coat and tell them she's yours.'

'She kind of is, you know . . .' She looked embarrassed. 'Kind of . . . after all, she's got my name.' He bent over and kissed her forehead then, there was nothing more he could have said in answer without bursting into tears.

26

Charlie held his breath when the plane left the Denver airport on Saturday morning. They had Sam's orthopaedic surgeon with them, as well as a young resident, two nurses, a life-support unit, and enough oxygen to blow them all the way to South America, but Samantha was slightly sedated, seemed very relaxed, and was excited to be going home. The doctor seemed pleased with her condition and had made all the necessary arrangements both at Lenox Hill Hospital and with an ambulance unit that would be waiting for them at the airport when they arrived. In addition they were getting special clearance all along their route and were making themselves known to air-traffic control from sector to sector. If Sam had

would be a terrible mistake. When the time comes, she'll have to stand on her own, so to speak. She's not married, is she?"

Charlie shook his head. 'No, not anymore. And that's what I was just thinking. It's going to be very rough.'

'It will be for a while. But she'll get used to it. Others do. She can lead a full life. She can help herself, help others, she can go back to her job in time. Unless she's a tap dancer by profession, it shouldn't make that much difference, except psychologically. That's where the problems arise. But they won't let her leave Lenox Hill until she's ready, psychologically as well as physically. They'll teach her how to take care of herself, be independent. You'll see. She's a beautiful young woman, a strong one with a fine mind, there's no reason why she shouldn't adjust perfectly.' And then after a moment he gave Charlie's shoulder one last squeeze and smiled. 'You've made the right decision . . . both times. It would have been a crime not to operate, to lose that spirit and that mind, and she should be in New York, surrounded by friendly faces.' Charlie turned to look at him then, with gratitude in his eyes.

'Thank you for saying that.' The doctor said nothing. He only patted Charlie's shoulder and went back to take a look at Sam.

Two hours later they landed at Kennedy Airport. The transfer to the large ambulance unit went perfectly smoothly, and a life-support unit with three paramedics travelled alongside. Their lights were flashing but there were no sirens as they made their way along the highway at full speed. And half an hour later they reached Lenox Hill without a problem.

Sam was smiling up at Charlie as they made the last leg of the trip. 'It's quicker this way, you know that, no baggage claim to hassle with and no cabs.'

'Look, next time,' Charlie said, grinning at her, 'do me a favour. Hassle me a little with the baggage and let's take a cab.'

She grinned up at him, but once they arrived at Lenox

Hill, she was busy. It took them more than two hours to process her into the hospital and settle her comfortably in her own room. The doctor assisted with all the arrangements, then she met the new doctor who had been awaiting her arrival, thanks to Harvey once again. When it was all over she and Charlie and the doctor from Denver were all exhausted. The rest of the group had been dispensed with. They had all been paid before the trip and they would all be returning to Denver on the ambulance plane later that evening. The doctor was going to spend a few days in New York observing at Lenox Hill and would return to Denver by commercial jet.

'Think you'll be okay now, Sam?' Charlie looked at her with a tired smile as she accepted a shot and began almost instantly to drift off to sleep.

'Yeah, babe . . . sure . . . I'll be fine . . . give Mellie my . . . and thank you . . .' Five minutes later he was in the elevator with the doctor, and then he was in a cab, and a minutes later he was on East Eighty-first Street with his arms tightly around his wife.

'Oh, baby . . . oh, baby . . .' He felt as though he had come back from a war zone, and suddenly he realised how desperately he had missed her and how exhausted he was by Sam's tragedy and Charlie's total responsibility for what had been an awesome weight to carry, and he hadn't even himself feel it until now, when suddenly all he wanted to do was make love to his wife. She had had the foresight to have hired a baby-sitter to be with the children, and after they all duly attacked their father, teased and played and ran him ragged, she shooed them off with the baby-sitter, closed the bedroom door, ran a bath for him, gave him a massage, and made love to him, before he smiled at her sleepily and fell asleep in their bed. She woke him up again two hours later, with dinner, champagne, and a little cake she had made for him that said "I love you. Welcome home".

'Oh, Mellie, I love you so much.'

'I love you too.' And then, as they ate the cake, 'Do you think we should call Sam?' But Charlie shook his head, he

had given her all he had to give for a while. Just this once, just tonight, he wanted to be with Mellie. He didn't want to think of the horrible accident, of the grey horse that had haunted him in his sleep for three weeks, of Sam in her plaster cast or her 'barbecue' or the fact that she would never walk again. He just wanted to be with his wife, and to make love to her, until he fell into her arms and passed out, which he did shortly after midnight, with a last sleepy yawn and a broad smile.

'Welcome home,' she whispered to him softly as she kissed his neck and turned off the light.

27

'Mother, I'm fine really . . . don't be silly . . . there's no reason for you to come up . . . oh, for chrissake . . . yes, of course I'm still in a cast, but I'm fine here. No, I don't want to be moved to Atlanta. I just was moved here from Denver three weeks ago, that's enough . . . because this is my home, Mother. I don't know anyone in Atlanta. Yes, of course, I have you and George . . . Mother . . . now, Mother . . . please! I don't resent him . . .' She rolled her eyes at Melinda as she walked into Sam's hospital room, and made a horrible face at the receiver, mouthing 'My mother' to Melinda, who grinned. 'Honestly, Mother, the doctor is wonderful, I like him . . . I know he's competent because he told me so and his mother loves him. Come on, Ma. Give me a break. I'm fine, I'll call you. You can call me. When I feel up to it, I'll come to Atlanta . . . I know when I can go home . . . but I'll tell you I promise . . . no, Mother, I have to go now . . . the nurse is waiting . . . no, you can't talk to her . . . good-bye, Mother.' She hung up and groaned. 'Hi, Mellie. What did I ever do to get saddled with my mother?'

'She's just worried about you, Sam.'
'I know. But she drives me nuts. She wants to come up here to visit. With George, who wants to consult with my doctor, and turn the whole hospital upside down. Tell me what an ear, nose, and throat man from Georgia can possibly have to contribute to my broken back?' Mellie grinned at the thought. 'How's life by you?'

'Okay. How are you?'

'Bored. I want to go home.'

'What do they say?'

'Something inane about patience. How's my name-sake?' She beamed at the mention of little Sam.

'Wonderful.' Mellie smiled too. 'She does more at two months than any of the boys did at four.'

'It's the name,' Sam assured her with a grin. 'Just make sure she doesn't get into trouble with horses.' Mellie didn't answer and Sam sighed. 'I wish I knew how long I'll be stuck here.' But Mellie suspected that she didn't really want to know. Charlie had told her that Sam would probably be in the hospital for a year.

She got visits from everyone including Harvey, who sat nervously on the edge of his chair, fingering his hat, toying with his pipe, and staring nervously at Sam in her body cast lying helplessly on the bed.

'Don't look so uptight, for chrissake, Harvey. I won't bite you.'

'Will you sign a document to that effect?'

'I'd be glad to.' He smiled his rueful smile and she asked him when he was going to get smart and fire her.

'I can't, Sam. I'm saving you for my old age. Besides, I just saw the answer print of the first commercial from your great adventure out west. Sam'—he sounded almost breathless with admiration—'if you never do anything in your whole lifetime except lie there and eat chocolates, you can be proud of this.'

'That good?' She sounded stunned. He was generally not lavish with praise. But she had heard from Charlie that morning that the stuff was damn good.

'It's better than that. It's superb. And they say the

others will be better still. My dear, I'm in awe.'

She looked at him for a long moment and then grinned at him. 'I think I must be dying, for you to be talking like this.'

'Hardly. We'll get it all put on tape for you eventually and bring it up here with a video machine for you to see it before we ever put it on the air. But I'm afraid after all this, Miss Samantha, I really am going to retire and make you C.D.'

'Don't threaten me, Harvey.' She glared at him. 'I don't want your damn job, so you stay where you are, or I'll stay here.'

'God forbid.'

He came to see her once or twice a week. Charlie came to visit often at lunchtime, Henry Johns-Adams had already come to see her twice, bringing her a box of divine Godiva chocolates, and his friend had sent her a beautiful bed jacket from Bergdorf's, which she could hardly wait to wear when she got rid of her cumbersome cast. And Georgie, the French poodle, had sent her a get-well card and a book.

But a week later Sam got the visit to end all visits. Despite her protestations that she didn't want a visit from her mother, she arrived from Atlanta with her husband and did her best to turn the whole hospital upside down. She spent several hours trying to convince Samantha to sue her office, that if it weren't for them and their ridiculous commercials, she wouldn't have been on that trip, that it was obviously a dangerous assignment, that they didn't give a damn about her, and that her boss was undoubtedly some kind of a lunatic who didn't care two pins that she was now flat on her back. Her whole tack so enraged Samantha that she asked her to leave and then had to relent when her mother cried and insisted that Sam was a sadistic ingrate determined to break her mother's heart. On the whole it was an exhausting meeting, which left Samantha shaking and pale, but not nearly as upset as she was when her mother and George returned to see her the next day. They entered Sam's room with identical

funereal expressions and it was clear that her mother had been crying, and once she sat down, she started again.

'Good God, Mother, what's the matter?' It made Sam nervous just to see them, and she was already upset. She had called Caroline Lord that morning to see how Bill was, and learned that he had had another heart attack, this one more serious than the first one. And chained to her bed in her body cast at Lenox Hill Hospital, she could do nothing to help Caro, and she suddenly felt useless and hemmed in. But Caro had been much more upset about the accident. She bit back the information about her own misfortune, thinking Caro had enough in her heart to carry around, but Charlie had obviously already told her. Caro was frantic with worry. Like all horsepeople, she knew the danger involved but she nevertheless was in a state of shock over Sam. She made Sam promise that she would call again. And if not, she would call Sam herself when she had a free moment from Bill.

But now all thought of Aunt Caro was pushed from her mind as she faced her mother, who was, as always, elegantly dressed, in a blue linen suit and a white silk blouse. She wore neat little spectator pumps and three strands of pearls and pearl earrings, and although she was a little plump woman of sixty, she still had the same extravagantly beautiful hair as Sam. Hers was snow white now, but once it had been as gold as Sam's. Her husband was tall and handsome and looked more like a naval captain than a doctor. He was barrel chested and florid, with a great shock of snowy white hair.

'Oh, Samantha . . .' her mother lamented as George held her hand and she sat back, almost inert, in the chair. 'For chrissake, what's wrong?' Samantha suddenly had an odd, creeping feeling, as though something terrible were about to happen to her, or maybe it already had.

'Oh, Samantha . . .'
'Jesus.' If she could have, she'd have screamed, or maybe just tapped her feet. But her feet had only tingled and hung like dead meat since her body had been surrounded by what felt like cement. The nurses all told

her that it was normal to feel that way in a body cast, and Sam had found that comforting. For a while there she had been worried that her legs were shot. 'So what's up, guys?' She eyed them with irritation and hostility. She couldn't wait for them to go home. 'Don't keep me in suspense.' But her mother only cried more. It was her stepfather who eventually took the first step.

'Samantha, we have spoken at some length to your doctor this morning.'

'Which one? I have four.'

She felt like an irritable, sassy teenager as she watched them with suspicion. But she just wanted them to go away and leave her alone.

But her stepfather was a man of precision. 'In fact we spoke to two of them. Dr. Wong and Dr. Josephs. They were both very informative and very kind.' He looked at her with obvious pity, and his wife cast woeful eyes in his direction before she sobbed again and he went on.

'Did they say anything to bring all this hysteria on? Anything I should know?' She glanced at her mother in annoyance and then back at George.

'Yes, there is. And much as it pains us, we think it's time you knew. The doctors have simply been waiting until— until the right time. But now that we're here . . .' It sounded like the perfect beginning for an eulogy as he said it, and Samantha wanted to look around to see who was in the casket. He looked like an undertaker, not a sea captain, she decided and tried to fix her face politely as he went on. 'Now that we're here, we feel it's time you knew.'

'Knew what?'

'The truth.' Suddenly, as he said it, a little alarm went off somewhere near Sam's heart. It was as if she knew. As if she had known all along, without knowing, as though she sensed exactly what they were going to say.

'Oh?' was all she said.

'Yes.'

'The accident . . . well, Sam, it was a very grave injury you sustained when you fell. Your spinal column was severely fractured in two places. It was a very serious injury.'

that you didn't die from the shock and those ruptures, and also that there was no brain damage, which of course they're sure now there wasn't.'

'Gee, thanks. That's nice. But the rest?' Her heart pounded but her face gave nothing away.

'As you know, as for the rest, you weren't so lucky, or you wouldn't be here in that unfortunate cast.' He sighed briefly but continued. 'What you don't know, however, and we feel you should, as do your doctors, I might add—it really is time. What you don't know, Samantha, is that'—he hesitated for only a fraction of a second before lowering the boom—'you are now a paraplegic.'

There was a moment's silence and she stared at him. 'What exactly does that mean, George?'

'That you'll never walk again. You will retain the full use of your upper torso, your arms, shoulders, et cetera, but the real damage was done just at your waistline. One can see it perfectly on the X rays,' he explained informatively with a professional air. 'From that point on there's nothing. You may have some sensation, as I suppose you already do now, but that's all. You'll have no muscle control certainly, no ability to use your legs. You will of course have to use a wheelchair.' And then he delivered the final shock. 'But of course your mother and I decided this morning that you will come to live with us.'

'No, I won't!' It was a shriek of panic, and both her mother and stepfather looked stunned.

'Of course you will, darling.' Her mother stretched out a hand and Sam shrank from it like a wounded animal, wanting desperately to run away. Her eyes were wild as she looked at them. They had no right to tell her this. It wasn't true . . . it couldn't be . . . no one else had told her . . . but she knew almost before she heard it that it was in fact the truth—and what she had been hiding from almost since the moment she'd gained consciousness in Denver. It was the one thing no one ever said. Except these two people. They had come here to tell her this, as though it were their mission, and she didn't want to hear anything that they had just said.

'I don't want to, Mother.' She spoke through clenched teeth, but they refused to understand.

'But you can't take care of yourself anymore. You'll be as helpless as a baby.' Her mother painted a picture that made Sam want to die.

'I won't! I won't, dammit . . . I'll kill myself first!' She was shrieking.

'Samantha! How dare you say such a thing!'

'I will if I want to, dammit. I will not be confined to this life, to the life of a cripple. And I don't want to be as helpless as a baby, living in Atlanta with my parents at the age of thirty-one. How could this have happened to me, dammit . . . it can't have happened, I won't let it happen.'

Her mother stood helplessly by as George put on his most professional bedside manner and attempted to soothe her but she just screamed louder, and her mother's eyes looked at her husband and implored him that they should go.

'Maybe we should come back and talk about this later . . .' They edged slowly toward the door. 'You need some time to yourself, Samantha, to adjust . . . we have plenty of time to discuss it, we're not leaving until tomorrow, and the doctors don't think you'll be leaving here anyway until May or June.'

'What?' It was a final wail of pain.

'Samantha . . .' For an instant her mother looked as though she would approach her, and Sam could only snarl from the bed.

'Get out of here, for God's sake . . . please . . .' She began to sob uncontrollably. 'Just go . . .' They did as she bid them, and suddenly she was alone in the empty room with the echo of their words. A nurse found her there half an hour later, sawing hopelessly at her wrists with the barely sharp edges of a plastic cup.

The damage she did was repaired with a few stitches, but the damage her mother and stepfather did took several months to heal.

'How's it going, kid?' Charlie shook the snow from his collar, took off his coat, and threw it on a chair. There was even snow in his beard and in his hair. 'So?' He looked at her expectantly, and she shrugged.

'What do you expect? For me to sit in my chair wearing a pink tutu and do an arabesque for you when you walk in?'

'Ooohhhhh-eeee, charming today, aren't we?'

'Get fucked.'

He looked at his watch with a pensive expression. 'I'd like to, but Mellie has a PTA meeting, and actually I don't have time. I have a client meeting at two.'

'Very funny.'

'That's more than I can say for you.'

'Well, I'm not funny anymore. That's life. I'm thirty-one years old and I'm a cripple in a wheelchair. That is neither funny, nor amusing, nor cute.'

'No, but it's not necessarily as pitiful as you'd like to make it either.' He had seen her this way for three and a half months. Ever since her idiot stepfather had broke the news. She was out of the body cast now and wearing brace and moving around in a wheelchair. But now came the hard part, the gruelling months of physical therapy when she learned to live with her handicap, or not. She doesn't have to be as lousy as this, Sam. You don't have to be a "helpless cripple," as your mother puts it.'

'No? Why not? You going to make a miracle again give me back the power over my legs?' She pounded them as if they were old rubber.

'No, I can't do that, Sam.' He spoke gently but firmly. 'But you've got the power of your mind and your arm your hands and'—he grinned for an instant—'the

snowed under and so am I. Are you willing to pick yourself up again and stop feeling sorry for yourself, or aren't you?

She was very quiet for a long moment, her back turned in her chair, her head bowed. 'I haven't decided yet.' She said it very softly and he smiled.

'I love you, Sam.' And then she turned slowly to face him, and when she did, he saw that there were tears running slowly down her face.

'What the hell am I going to do, Charlie? Where am I going to live? And how? . . . Oh, Christ, I'm so afraid I'll end up with my mother in Atlanta. They call me every day to tell me what a helpless cripple I am now, and that's what I keep thinking . . . that I am . . .'

'You're not. There's nothing helpless about you. You may have to make some changes in your life, but nothing as radical as Atlanta. Christ, you'd go nuts there.' She nodded sadly, and he took her chin in his hand. 'Mellie and I won't let that happen, even if you have to come and live with us.'

But I don't want to be helpless, Charlie. I want to take care of myself.'

'So do it. Isn't that what they're teaching you here?' She nodded slowly. 'Yeah. But it takes forever.'

'How long is forever? Six months? A year?' 'Something like that.'

'Isn't it worth it, not to have to live in Atlanta?' 'Yes.' She wiped her tears away with her fancy bed jacket. 'For that, it would be worth five years.'

'Then do it, learn what you've got to, and then come on back out in the world and do your thing, Sam. And meanwhile—he smiled at her and glanced at his watch—'do me a favour and read those files and memos. For Harvey.'

'Never mind "for Harvey." You're both full of shit. I know what you're doing, but I'll try it. Send him my love.'

'He sent you his. He said he'd be up here tomorrow.'

'Tell him not to forget my Mickey Spillanes.'

She and Harvey were addicted to the detective books

and Harvey kept shipping her copies of them to amuse herself with.

'Oh, Christ . . . you two.' Charlie struggled back into his heavy overcoat, put on his galoshes, pulled up his collar, and waved at her from the door.

'So long, Santa Claus, Give my love to Mellie.'

'Yes, ma'am.' He saluted and disappeared, and for a long time she sat in her chair, staring at the files. It was almost Christmas again and she had been thinking of Tate all morning. Only a year before she had been on the Lord Ranch, and Tate had played Santa to the kids. It had been then that she had started to get to know him, then that it had all begun. It had been Christmas Day when he had taken her to the hidden cabin. Thinking about him made it all come alive again and she felt the familiar ache as she wondered again where he had gone.

She had talked to Caroline only that morning. Bill had had a small stroke after Thanksgiving, and in the past few months he had done nothing but go downhill. In the midst of the gloomy reports she hated to bother Caro with inquiries about Tate Jordan, but eventually she had anyway, and as always she had no news. Caroline herself was terribly despressed about the state of Bill's health. She had just hired a new foreman, a young man with a wife and three kids, and he seemed to be doing a good job. And as always, she had encouraged Sam to push on. The physical therapy that Sam was enduring was the hardest work of her life and she wondered if it was worth it; strengthening her arms so that she could almost swing like a monkey, get herself in and out of her chair, in and out of bed, on and off the pot, anything she would need to do to live alone. If she would cooperate, the staff would train her to manage totally independently. She had resisted, balking at the help offered her—in her heart she felt it didn't really matter anyway—but now, now suddenly it seemed important to push on. Charlie was right. She had lived—that was reason enough to push on.

Christmas Day itself was a difficult holiday for her.

Harvey Maxwell came by, and Charlie and Mellic and the kids. The nurse let them all in and she got to hold the baby, who was almost five months old now and prettier than ever. When they all left, she felt desperately alone. By the end of the afternoon she thought that she simply couldn't bear it, and out of sheer desperation she left her room and wheeled herself slowly down the hall. And then at the very end of the floor she found a little boy in a wheelchair like hers, sitting sadly by the window, staring out at the snow.

'Hi, my name's Sam.' Her heart ached for him, and then he turned toward her. He couldn't have been more than six, and his eyes were filled with tears.

'I can't play in the snow anymore.'

'Neither can I. What's your name?'

'Alex.'

'What did you get for Christmas?'

'A cowboy hat and a holster. But I can't ride horses either.'

She nodded slowly, and then suddenly she wondered. 'Why not?'

He looked at her as though she were very stupid. 'Because I'm in this wheelchair, dummy. I got hit by a car, riding my bike, and now I have to be in this thing forever.' And then he looked at her curiously. 'What about you?'

'I fell off a horse in Colorado.'

'Yeah?' He looked at her with interest and she grinned.

'Yeah. And you know something, I bet I could still ride, and I'll bet you could too. I saw this article once in a magazine that showed people like us riding horses. I think they had special saddles, but they did it.'

'Did they have special horses?' He looked enchanted at the idea and Sam smiled and shook her head.

'I don't think so. Just nice ones.'

'Did a nice horse make you fall off?' He stared at her legs and then her face.

'No. He wasn't a nice horse. But I was pretty silly to ride him. He was a real mean horse, and I did a lot of

stupid things when I was riding him.'

'Like what?'

'Gallop all over the place and take a lot of chances.' It was the first time she had been that honest with herself. It was also the first time she had talked about the accident, and she was surprised by how little it hurt. 'Do you like horses, Alex?'

'I sure do. I went to the rodeo once.'

'Did you? I used to work on a ranch.'

'No, you didn't.' He looked disgusted. 'Girls don't work on ranches.'

'Yes they do. I did.'

'Did you like it?' He still looked doubtful.

'I loved it.'

'Then why did you stop?'

'Because I came back to New York.'

'How come?'

'I missed my friends.'

'Oh. You got kids?'

'Nope.' She felt a small twinge as she said it, thinking longingly of little baby Sam. 'Do you have any kids, Alex?' She grinned at him and he guffawed.

'Of course not. You're silly. Is your name really Sam?'

'Yup. It's really Samantha. My friends call me Sam.'

'Mine is Alexander. But only my mum calls me that.'

'Want to go for a ride?' She was feeling restless and he was as good a companion as any.

'Now?'

'Sure. Why not? You expecting a visitor?'

'No.' He looked momentarily sad again. 'They just went home. I was watching them leave from the window.'

'Okay, then why don't you and I take a little tour?' She grinned mischievously at him, gave him a push to start him, and told the nurse at the desk that she was taking Alex for a ride, and the entire nurses' station waved good-bye as they headed for the elevators and from there to the gift shop on the main floor. Sam bought him a lollipop and two candy bars, and some magazines for herself. Then they decided to buy some bubble gum too

and they came back to their floor, blowing bubbles and playing guessing games.

'Wanna come see my room?'

'Sure.' He had a tiny Christmas tree covered with little Snoopy decorations, and the walls were pasted with pictures and cards from his friends at school.

'I'm gonna go back too. My doctor says I don't have to go to a special school. If I do my therapy, I can be just like everyone else, almost.'

'That's what my doctor says too.'

'Do you go to school?' He looked intrigued, and she laughed.

'No. I work.'

'What do you do?'

'I work at an advertising agency, we make commercials.'

'You mean like to sell kids junk on TV? My mum says at the people who write them are irresponsible...'

'Irresponsible. Actually I write commercials to sell junk to grown-ups mostly, like cars, or pianos, or lipstick, or to make you smell good.'

'Yuck.'

'Yeah, well . . . maybe one day I'll go back to working on a ranch.' He nodded wisely. It sounded sensible to him.

'You married, Sam?'

'Nope.'

'How come?'

'No one wants me, I guess.' She was teasing but he nodded seriously. 'You married, Alex?'

'No.' He grinned. 'But I've got two girl friends.'

'Two . . .?' And the conversation went on for hours. They shared dinner that night and Sam came back to kiss him good night and tell him a story, and when she went back to her room, she smiled peacefully to herself and attacked a stack of work.

Alex left the hospital in April. He went home with his mum and dad, and then back to school. He sent Sam a letter every week, telling her that he was just like the other kids again, he even went to a special baseball game every Sunday with his dad, and a bunch of other kids in wheelchairs. He dictated the letters to his mother and Sam saved them all in a special file. She sent him letters too, and bubble gum, and pictures of horses, and anything she found in the gift shop that looked like something he'd like. Their connection somehow made Sam feel stronger. More like pushing on. But the testing time for Sam came at the end of the month, when her doctor brought up the question of going home.

'Well, what do you think? Think you're ready?' She panicked at the thought and shook her head.

'Not yet.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know . . . I'm not sure I can manage . . . I'm not . . . my arms aren't strong enough . . .' Suddenly she had a thousand excuses, but that the doctor knew was normal. She felt safe in her cocoon, and she no longer wanted to leave. Doctor Nolan knew that when the time came they would have to push her gently, and she would resist them every inch of the way.

Indeed she had a comfortable routine all worked out for herself. Three hours of P.T. every morning, three hours of paperwork from her office every afternoon. The ads, which had won her seven new awards, and among them the much coveted Clio, had long since aired, and she was adding to the campaign with new concepts. Henry Johns-Adams and his friend and Charlie were about to head west to shoot two more ads.

stay with her. It would have been Sam who would have run away. But she didn't have to. He had already been gone for a year.

It was spring when they finally pushed her gently from the nest, despite her mother's protests. Her doctor released her from the hospital on the first of May, on a splendid warm sunny day, and she went to see her apartment for the first time. She had had to rely once more on Charlie and Mellic, she had had to call movers and have everything packed up in her old place. With the stairs in her old apartment, she knew that there was no way she could manage entirely alone, and miraculously an apartment had turned up in Melinda and Charlie's building. It was a ground-floor apartment with a small sunny garden, and it was going to be perfect for Samantha because it had no stairs, an easy access, and a doorman. It was just exactly what the doctor ordered, and Samantha had instructed the movers to put the furniture as per the diagram she had drawn up for them and just to leave the crates of her belongings for her to unpack herself. It was going to be her first challenge after she left the hospital, and it was a big one.

She huffed and she puffed and she attacked the boxes and she sweated, and once she even fell out of her chair trying to hang a small painting on the wall. But she got up, she hung it up, she unpacked the crates, she made her bed, she washed her hair, she did all the things they had taught her. She felt so victorious by Monday morning that when she showed up at the office in a black skirt and a black turtleneck sweater, with fashionable black suede boots and a red bow in her hair, she looked younger and healthier than she had all that terrible year. When her mother called at noon to lament her daughter's fate, Sam was busy at a meeting. After that she went to lunch at Lutèce with Charlie and Harvey to celebrate her return, and by the end of the week she had seen her first client, and she had handled it with grace as well as ease. It intrigued her to see that men still looked at her like she

was attractive, and even her terror that it was pity that motivated the looks couldn't dim the pleasure of knowing that even if she wasn't a functioning woman her femininity still existed. The question of dating was one she had refused to discuss with the psychiatrist at the hospital. She considered that a closed door, and for the time being they had left it alone and worked on the rest. She had made such progress in every other area that they figured sooner or later she would come around. She was after all only thirty-one, and incredibly pretty. It was unlikely that a woman like Sam Taylor would spend the rest of her life alone, no matter what she said now.

'Well,' Harvey, wearing one of his rare smiles, lifted a glass of champagne. 'I propose a toast to Samantha. May you live another hundred years, without taking a single day off from CHL. Thank you.' He bowed and the three of them chuckled, and then Sam toasted them. By the end of the lunch they were half drunk and Sam was making bad jokes about not being able to drive her chair. She ran into a policeman, who was almost brought to his knees.

'Charlie, for chrissake! Watch where you're going!' 'I was . . . I think he's drunk. Disgusting too, an officer on duty!'

The three of them laughed like kids, and had trouble sobering up when they got back to the office. Eventually they all gave up and left early. It had been a very big day.

That Saturday Sam took her little friend Alex to lunch, the two of them sunning in their chairs. They had hot dogs and French fries and she took him to a movie. They sat side by side in the aisle at Radio City, and his eyes were huge as he watched the show. When she took him home at the end of the day, she felt a little tug at her heart to give him back to his mother, and she took refuge at Mellic's apartment on the way home, where she played with the baby. Suddenly, as Sam rolled her wheelchair carefully and slowly across the room, little Sam stood up, and on tiptoe, with arms flailing, little Sam followed her, as 'Big

Sam,' as they called her in the baby's presence, sat in her wheelchair and gaped. And then, as the child fell cooing to the rug, Sam shouted for Mellic, who arrived just in time to see the baby do the same stunt again, and she was only ten months old.

'She's walking!' Mellic shouted to no one in particular. 'She's walking . . . Charlie! Sam's walking . . .' He arrived in the doorway with an expression of shock, not having understood that it was the baby, and then Sam looked at him in astonishment with tears rolling down her face, and then she smiled and held out her arms to the laughing baby.

'Oh, yes, she is!'

30

Crane, Harper, and Laub won a Clio again that year for another of Sam's commercials, and by year's end, she had brought in two more major accounts. Her mother's premonitions of doom had not come to pass. Instead she was working harder than ever, managing her apartment with ease, seeing a few friends, and having occasional Saturday-afternoon movie dates with now seven-year-old Alex. On the whole Sam was happy with her life. She was glad she had lived—glad she had survived. Still, she wasn't entirely sure where it was all going. Harvey was still the creative director and still threatening to retire but Sam never believed him until the first of November, when he called her into his office and pointed absentmindedly to a chair.

'Sit down, Sam.'

'Thank you, Harvey, I am.' She grinned at him with amusement and he looked momentarily flustered and then laughed.

'Don't make me nervous, dammit, Sam. I have some-

thing to tell you . . . no, ask you . . .'

'You want to propose after all these years?' It was a standing joke between them. He had been happily married for the last thirty-two years.

'No, dammit, I'm not kidding around today. Sam'—he stared at her almost fiercely—'I'm going to do it. I'm going to retire on the first of the year.'

'When did that hit you, Harvey? This morning?' She was still smiling. She never took his retirement threats seriously anymore, and she was perfectly happy with her job the way it was. Her salary had escalated satisfactorily over the years, and CHL had given her so much in terms of kindness and understanding during her various problems and illness that she felt an unseverable loyalty to them anyway. She didn't need Harvey's job. 'Why don't you just relax and take a nice vacation with Maggie this Christmas, someplace warm, like the Caribbean. And then come back like a big kid, roll up your sleeves, and get back to work.'

'I don't want to.' He suddenly sounded like a belligerent child. 'You know what, Sam? I'm fifty-nine years old, and all of a sudden I wonder what I'm doing. Who gives a damn about commercials? Who remembers anything we do by next year? And I'm missing the last of my best years with Maggie, sitting at this desk, working my ass off. I don't want to do that anymore. I want to go home, Sam, before it's too late. Before I miss my chance, before she gets sick, or I do, or one of us dies. I never thought that way before, but I'll be sixty years old next Tuesday and I just figured, screw it. I'm going to retire now, and you can't talk me out of it, because I won't let you. So what I called you in here to ask you was, do you want my job, Sam, because if you do, you can have it. In fact my asking you is only a formality, because whether you want it or not, it's yours.'

She sat there, awed, for a moment, not sure what she should say. 'Harvey, that was quite a speech.'

'I meant every bit of it.'

'Well, in a funny way I think you're right.' She had

spent months thinking about Bill King and Aunt Caro, and she wondered if they had enjoyed every moment they could, right until the end. They had been so busy hiding what they were doing for so many years that they had missed a lot of times together that they might otherwise have shared. To Sam, it seemed like a hell of a waste of energy they could have better spent together, but it was all in the past now. What concerned her more was Caro, who had been in such awful shape in the eight months since he had died. She had been in what Sam considered a deep depression for several months, and she wanted to go out and see her, but the one thing she hadn't tackled yet was travelling. She was comfortable on home turf now and knew she could manage, but leaving home to go any great distance still scared her. She hadn't been to Atlanta either, and knew she probably never would. But a visit to Aunt Caro would have been different. She just hadn't taken matters in hand and got organised to go. She was thinking vaguely about Christmas, but that wasn't sure. She had funny feelings about going back there at Christmastime and facing all her memories of Tate.

'Well, Sam, do you want to be C.D.?' It was a direct question that required a direct answer, and Sam looked at him with a small hesitant smile.

'You know, the funny thing is that I don't know. I like working for you, Harvey, and I used to think that being creative director was the end of the rainbow. But the truth is, in the last year or two my life has changed so much, so have my values, and I'm not sure I want everything that goes with it: the sleepless nights, the headaches, the ulcers, especially now. The other thing I'm concerned with is that the C.D. should really travel, and I'm just not comfortable doing that yet. I don't feel safe about it, that's why I haven't flown out to see my friend in California. I don't know, Harvey, maybe I'm not the right person anymore for the job. What about Charlie?'

'He's the art director, Sam. You know yourself how unusual it is for an art director to become C.D. It's a separate issue.'

'Maybe. But he could do it and he'd be good.'
'So would you. Will you think about it?'
'Of course I will. You're really serious though this time, aren't you?' She was as surprised by his decision as by her own hesitation to accept. But she wasn't sure anymore if that was what she wanted, and however well she was managing life from her wheelchair, she just wasn't sure if she had enough mobility for the job. 'How soon do you want to know?'

'In a couple of weeks.' She nodded and they chatted for a few moments before she left his office, and when she did, she had every intention of giving Harvey an answer at the end of two weeks time. But ten days later, life threw her a curveball, and she felt as though the sky had fallen in on her. She had felt like that fairly often in the last two years.

She sat in her office with the letter she had just got from Caroline's lawyer, and with tears running slowly down her face, she wheeled across the hall to Charlie's office and stopped in the doorway with a look of shock on her face.

'Something wrong?' He stopped what he was doing and came instantly toward her. It was a stupid question. She was white-faced and she nodded and continued into the room, holding out the letter, which he took and read, and then he stared at her with the same look of amazement on his face. 'Did you know?'

She was crying softly now as she shook her head and then answered. 'I never even thought of it . . . but I guess there's no one else.' And then suddenly she flung out arms to him, and he held her. 'Oh, Charlie, she's gone. What am I going to do?'

'It's all right, Sam. It's all right.' But he was as stupid as Samantha. Caroline Lord had died the previous weekend. For an instant Sam was hurt that no one had called her—where was Josh, why hadn't he let her know? But the moment passed. They were drifters, it would have occurred to them to call her in New York.

In accordance with Caroline's will, the ranch had been left to Sam. She had died in her sleep, without a

problem. And Charlie suspected, as Sam did, that she just willed it to happen. She hadn't wanted to live without Bill King.

Samantha wheeled slowly away from Charlie then and went to stare out of the window. 'Why would she leave me the ranch, Charlie? What the hell am I going to do with it? I can't do anything with it now.' Her voice trailed off as she thought of the happy times she had spent there, with her friend Barbara, with Caroline and Bill, and with Tate. She thought of the secret cabin, of Black Beauty, of Josh, and the tears only flowed more swiftly down her face.

'What do you mean you can't do anything with it?' Charlie's voice questioned her, as did his eyes when she turned to face him again.

'Because however much I may not like to admit it, however much I may try to pretend I'm normal with my job and my friends and my living alone and my taking cabs, the fact is, Charlie, as my dear mother says, I'm a cripple. What the hell would I do with a ranch? Watch them ride the horses? A ranch is for healthy people, Charlie.'

'You're as healthy as you allow yourself to be. The horse has four legs, Sam. You don't need any. Let him do the walking. It has a lot more style than your chair.'

'You're not funny.' She sounded angry as she said it, and she spun around and left the room.

But five minutes later he had followed her to her office, and he wanted to discuss it, no matter how angry she got, how loud she screamed.

'Leave me alone, dammit! A woman I loved a great deal just died and you want to bug me about how I should go out there and ride horses. Leave me alone!' She screamed the words at him but it didn't convince him.

'No, as a matter of fact I won't. Because I think the truth is that although it's damn sad that she died, she just gave you the gift of a lifetime, not because of what the place must be worth, but because that is a dream you could live with for the rest of your life, Sam. I've watched you here since you came back, and you're as good at it as

you always were, but the truth of it is, I don't think you care anymore. I don't think you want to be here. I think that ever since you fell in love with that cowboy and worked on the ranch, all you want is that, Sam. You don't want to be back here. And now your friend has given it to you, all of it, lock, stock, and barrel, and suddenly you want to play cripple. Well, guess what, I think you're a coward, and I don't think you should be allowed to play that game.'

'And how do you plan to stop me from "playing cripple," as you put it?'

'Kick some sense into you, if I have to. Take you out there, rub your nose in it, remind you how much you love it all. Personally I think you're crazy and anything west of Poughkeepsie might as well be East Africa to me, but you, you're nuts about all that stuff. Christ, on that shoot last year, your eyes sparkled like light bulbs every time you saw a horse or a cow or talked to a foreman. It drove me nuts and you loved it, and now you're going to give all that away? What about doing something with it? What about bringing to life one of your dreams? You've talked so often to little Alex about that special riding class you'd read about once. The last time he came up here to pick you up for lunch, he told me you had said he could go riding one day, and maybe you'd take him—what about turning her ranch into a place for people like you and Alex, what about doing something like that?' Sam stared at her friend in amazement as the tears stopped rolling down her cheeks.

'But I couldn't do that, Charlie . . . how would I start it, how could I? I don't know anything about all that.'

'You could learn. You know about horses. You know something about being in a wheelchair. You'll have plenty of people to help you run the ranch, all you have to do is coordinate it, like a giant commercial, and hell, you're good at that.'

'Charlie, you're crazy.'

'Maybe.' He looked at her with a grin. 'But tell the truth. Sam, wouldn't you enjoy being a little crazy too?'

'Maybe,' she answered honestly. She was still staring

him with a look of amazement. 'What do I do now?'

'Why don't you go out there and look around again, Sam. Hell, you own it.'

'Now?'

'Whenever you have time.'

'By myself?'

'If you want.'

'I don't know.' She turned away again and sat staring into space, thinking of the ranch and Aunt Caro. It would be so painful to see it again without her this time. It would be filled with memories of people she had cared about who were no longer there. 'I don't want to go out there alone, Charlie. I don't think I could handle it.'

'Then take someone with you.' He sounded matter-of-fact.

'Who do you suggest?' She looked at him sceptically. 'My mother?'

'God forbid. Hell, I don't know, Sam, take Mellie.'

'What about the kids?'

'Take all of us, then. Or never mind "taking us," we'll take ourselves. The kids would love it, so would we, and I'll tell you what I think once we get there.'

'Are you serious, Charlie?'

'Totally. I think this will be the most important decision you've ever made, and I'd hate to see you screw it up.'

'So would I.' She looked at him sombrely and suddenly thought about something. 'What about Thanksgiving?'

'What about it?'

'It's in three weeks, what if we all go out then?'

He thought for a minute and then grinned at her. 'You've got a deal. I'll call Mellie.'

'Think she'll want to go?'

'Hell yes. And if she doesn't'—he grinned— 'I'll go alone.' But Mellie offered no objection when he called her, and neither did the boys when they told them, and they didn't tell anyone else. They just quietly made reservations for a four-day trip over Thanksgiving. Samantha didn't even tell Harvey. She was afraid to upset him, and she still hadn't given him an answer about the job.

Samantha grew strangely quiet as they drove miles through the rolling hills on the family highway. But the others didn't notice. The excited, that they were jumping up and down in the car. Mellie had left the baby with her mother, and the trip had gone smoothly so far. It was obviously an unorthodox Thanksgiving, the grown-ups at least thought it would be worth it. They had eaten a dry little slice of turkey and some dressing on the airline, and Mellie had promised to put together a real turkey dinner the next day on the ranch.

Samantha had spoken to Josh again only that morning. The boys were going to sleep in sleeping bags in one of the two guestrooms, and Charlie and Melinda were going to sleep in Aunt Caro's room. Sam would sleep in the room she had last had. The house was large enough to accommodate all of them, and Josh had assured her that there were groceries and that if she liked he would bring them all up at the plane in L.A. But Sam had insisted she didn't want to spoil his Thanksgiving, she would help him when they got to the ranch. He had told her that his pained, halting way, how glad he was that she would help her. He just hoped she wouldn't do something like sell it, because he thought she could turn out to be one of the best damn ranchers around. She had smiled broadly as he said it, wished him a happy Thanksgiving, hurried to meet Mellie and Charlie and the boys in the lobby. They had had to take two cabs to the airport, now they were crowded into a huge station wagon, and the boys were singing songs.

But all Samantha could think of as they approached

ranch was how it had been the last time she had seen it, with Caroline and Bill King strong and healthy. Then she thought back once again to her days there with Tate. It all seemed like a dream now, it was so distant, the moments of joy she had shared with him, the hours at the cabin, the rides that they took on his pinto and Caro's handsome Thoroughbred stallion. She had been able to walk then. She felt a black cloud descend on her slowly as they turned the last bend in the road and she realised once again how much everything had changed.

'There it is.' She said it softly from the backseat, pointing a shaking finger. They passed through the main gate, drove up the winding road, and then she saw it; Aunt Caro's house. But there were no lights on, and although it was only five o'clock in the afternoon, it looked bleak and lonely and sad in the failing light. 'Josh said he'd leave the door open. If you want to go inside, Charlie, the living room lights are all on a panel on the right just behind the door.' Sam just sat there with her eyes riveted to the house. She kept expecting to see the lights come on, to see the familiar white hair, to see Aunt Caro's smiling face and a wave of the hand. But as Charlie went in to turn the lights on and then walked quickly back to the car, there was no one beside him, and even the boys grew quiet as they looked around the ranch.

'Where are the horses, Sam?'

'In the barn, love. I'll show you tomorrow.'

'Can't we see them now?'

She smiled at Charlie over their heads and then nodded. 'Okay, let's get our stuff inside, and then I'll take you all over.' But now that she was here, she didn't want to go into the house, or the barn, she didn't want to see Black Beauty standing in his stall, or Navajo, or the other familiar horses. All she wanted was to see Caroline and Bill King and Tate Jordan, and live a life that she never would see again. There was a lump in her throat the size of an apple as she got herself into her wheelchair and let Charlie back her up the stairs. She rolled herself slowly into the house then and looked around. Then, ever so

slowly, she began to roll toward her own room down the hall. A minute later the boys scampered past her, and she forced a smile as she showed them their room, and then she returned to the living room to find Charlie and Melinda. She pointed in the opposite direction, to the room, but she didn't want to see it. She didn't want to see the empty bedroom that had been Caro and Bill's.

'You all right?' Melinda looked at her gently and nodded.

'I'm okay. Honest.'

'You look tired.'

She wasn't though, she was just desperately unhappy. 'I'm fine.' She was remembering once again with all painful precision just how she had felt when she had left the ranch, not knowing where Tate was, or if she would ever find him, but still hopeful. And now she knew for certain that she would never see him again. Not only that but she had lost Caro . . . The thought of it weighed on her like wet cement. And then as she sat gazing out of the window at the dim hills in the twilight, she saw a bandy-legged little figure coming toward her, like an elf or a little wood sprite, and suddenly with damp eyes she was beaming. It was Josh. He had seen the lights in the house and he had hurried to see her. With a broad smile she pushed her way out the door and waited for him in her wheelchair on the porch. But as she did she saw him stop dead where he was standing, and she could see the look of shock on his face and hear the words. 'Oh, my God . . .'

And then suddenly, without knowing when she had started, she was crying, and so was he, and he was halfway up the stairs and she was reaching down, and he bent over her and held her, as together they cried, for Bill and for Caro and for Tate, and for Sam as well. For what seemed like hours there was only the muffled sound of their crying, and then after a time the wizened old cowboy sniffed loudly and stood up.

'Why didn't nobody never tell me, Sam?'

'I thought Miss Caro . . .' He shook his head with a look of despair.

'How did it happen?'

She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them. It was as though she too had shared in his shock. As though suddenly she saw herself as he saw her, crippled, in a wheelchair, no more the proud young palomino who had run all over the ranch. It was as though her life were over, as though she had suddenly grown old. And at that moment she knew she couldn't keep the ranch now. There was no way she could run it. All the men would react the same way to her as Josh had. She was a cripple now—no matter what they had told her at the hospital in New York.

'Sam . . .'

'It's okay, Josh.' She smiled gently at him and took a deep breath. 'It happened in Colorado, about fifteen months ago. It was something stupid I did with a horse.' The memory was blurred now, but she would always remember the grey stallion . . . Grey Devil . . . and the endless moment when she had flown through the air. 'I took a chance with a wild stallion. He was a real bitch to ride and he threw me into a ravine.'

'Why—why did you do it?' His eyes filled again as he watched her. He knew instinctively that she had pushed the horse too hard, and she didn't deny it.

'I don't know.' She sighed again. 'I was crazy, I guess. I think Black Beauty made me think I could handle any stallion I ever came up against and I was upset about something.' She had been depressed about Tate, but she didn't tell him that. 'So, that's what happened.'

'Will you . . . can they . . . ?' He didn't know how to finish, but she easily understood him and shook her head.

'No. This is it. I thought you knew though. I figured Caroline would have told you.'

'She never did.'

'Maybe she was too wrapped up with Bill. He had just had his first heart attack around that time. I wanted to come out but I was too busy with work, and then—' She faltered but went on. 'I was stuck in the hospital for ten months.' She looked around her at the familiar buildings.

'I should have come back though afterwards, but I don know . . . I think I was afraid to. Afraid to face what couldn't do anymore, so I never saw her again, Josh'—his lip trembled—'and she was so damn sad after Bill died and I never helped her.' She closed her eyes and held on her arms and she clung to the old cowboy again.

'She was all right, Sam. And she went like she wanted to. She didn't want to hang around without him.' Did he know, then? Had they all known? Had the pretence been farce for all those years? Sam looked into his face and saw that it was no secret. 'They were as good as married Sam.'

She nodded. 'I know. They should have got married.'

He only shrugged. 'You can't change old ways.' And then he looked down at her again, his eyes filled with questions. 'What about you?' He understood suddenly how unlikely it was that she'd keep the ranch now. 'You going to sell this place now?'

'I don't know.' She looked troubled as they lingered on the porch. 'I don't see how I could run it. I think maybe belong in New York.'

'You live with your folks now?' He seemed interested in how she managed but she shook her head with a small smile.

'Hell no. I live alone. I live in the same building as the friends who brought me out here. I had to get a new apartment, one without steps. But I can take care of myself.'

'That's terrific, Sam.' There was only a faint hint that he was talking to a cripple, but she knew he'd still have to make the adjustment. In some ways she still did too, so she didn't hold it against him. And then what he had said next shocked her. 'Why couldn't you do that out here Hell, we'd all help you. And shit, there's no reason why you can't ride. As long as you ride careful now.' He almost glared at her as he said it, and then he smiled.

'I don't know, Josh. I've been thinking about it, but it's all pretty scary. That was why I came out here. I didn't want to make the decision to sell till I came out here again to see for myself.'

'I'm glad you did. And you know'—he narrowed his eyes and stroked his chin, staring at the darkening horizon—'I think we got an old saddle in there I can fix up for you just fine. And I'll tell you one thing.' He turned back to glare at her. 'You ain't riding Black Beauty, if I have to kick your ass to keep you off him!'

'Try and stop me!' She was laughing now, it was almost like the old days, but he wasn't kidding around.

'It'll be my pleasure. I'd like to know who was the fool who let you ride that other stallion.'

'Someone who saw me ride.'

'Damn show-off.' It was the kind of thing Tate would have said and her eyes grew serious again as she looked at Josh.

'Josh?'

'Yeah?'

'Did you ever hear any more about Tate Jordan?' It had been more than a year and a half since he left, but Josh just shook his head.

'Nope. Just another cowboy. Drifted off God knows where. He would have made you a good foreman though, Sam.' Not to mention a good husband, but Sam didn't say what was in her heart.

'How's the new man?'

'All right. But he's leaving. He's already had an offer. He told the lawyer that yesterday morning. He don't want to take no chances that you might sell the ranch and he might lose his job, so he's movin' on while he can. He's got a bunch of kids,' Josh said by way of explanation and Sam watched him thoughtfully.

'What about you, Josh? You staying?'

'Hell yes. This has been my home for too many years for me to go anywhere. You're going to have to sell me with the ranch.'

'Tell you what, if I don't, how would you like to be foreman?'

'You kidding, Sam?' His eyes lit up with interest. 'I'd sure as hell like that, and my wife would be so full of herself she'd make us all sick. But I could live with that.'

They grinned at each other and he stuck out a rough hand, which she shook.

'Sam?' Charlie peeked out the screen door then, he had heard her talking and wondered who it was. She wheeled quickly in her wheelchair, made the introductions, and they talked for a few minutes about the ranch.

And then finally Josh looked down at her again. He had forgotten her for a minute in the conversation that went on above her head. 'How long you staying, Sam?'

'Just till Sunday. We have to get back. Charlie and I work together in New York. He's an artist.'

'I am not, I'm a genius.' They all grinned.

'Can you ride?' He shook his head and Josh smiled broadly. 'We'll teach you. And Sam says you've brought your kids.'

'Three of them. My sons.'

'How many you got in all?' Josh raised an eyebrow.

'Four. We left a baby girl at home.'

'Shit,' he guffawed, 'that ain't nothin'. I got six.'

'God save me!' Charlie looked faint and they all laughed.

Josh came in then to meet Mellie and the boys, and then they all trooped out to the barn to look at the horses, and the boys were so excited that they were jumping up and down in the straw and squealing while the others laughed. Plans were made for the next day to give them lessons, and then Sam stopped for a few moments to look at Black Beauty, sedate and splendid as ever in his stall.

'He's a fine looking horse, Sam, ain't he?' Even Josh looked him over with pride, and then he glanced at Sam as though he had just remembered something. 'He's yours now, Sam.'

'No.' Sam shook her head slowly, looking at Josh. 'He'll always be Caro's. But I'll ride him.' This time she smiled, but he didn't.

'No, you won't.'

'We can fight about that in the morning.' He looked doubtful but they wandered back to the big house, and he left them on the porch, with a last tender look at Sam. It

was then that she realised that it had been a homecoming. That even if the others were gone now, she still had Josh. And she had the beautiful ranch that Caroline had left her, and the memories of what her old friend had shared with Bill, and her own memories of Tate in their cabin—none of that would ever leave her, especially if she stayed right here.

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'Okay now, Sam . . . we got you . . . ' Two cowboys made a seat for her and held her while two more held the horse firmly. It wasn't Black Beauty they held between them, and not even Navajo, but a new horse named Pretty Girl. But this time the name didn't annoy her. She was surprised herself at how squeamish she felt and the horse was supposed to be very docile. Suddenly she was glad. They hoisted her into the saddle quickly, and Josh tied a bunch of straps around her, and then she sat there, perched in her saddle, staring down at them in amazement.

'By God, we did it. Look at that, I'm riding!' She looked like an ecstatic kid.

'No, you ain't.' Josh grinned at her with obvious pleasure. 'You're just sittin'. Get her movin' a little, Sam, and see how it feels.'

She looked down at him and whispered. 'Would you believe it, I'm scared.' She just sat there with a frightened expression alternating with a nervous smile, and after a moment Josh gently took the bridle and began to walk her on the quiet horse.

'You're okay, Sam. Come on, I'll walk you around the corral.'

'Josh, I feel like a baby.'
He looked over his shoulder with a tender smile. 'You are. Got to learn to walk, you know, before you can trot.' But a moment later he let go of the bridle and she began to trot slowly, and suddenly Sam's face broke out in a huge grin.

'Hey, guys, I'm running,' she was shouting, 'I'm running . . . look!' She was so excited, she could hardly stand it. For the first time in over a year, she wasn't moving along in a wheelchair, she was actually running again, and even if it wasn't under her own steam, the exhilaration of trotting along with the wind in her hair was the best feeling she'd known in years. It took Josh an hour to convince her that she'd had enough. And when they helped her down, she was so high, she was almost flying, her eyes were dancing, and her delicate face was framed by wisps of her golden hair.

'You sure looked good on that horse, Sam.' He smiled gently at her as they set her down in her chair.
She grinned a grin of confession. 'You know, at first I was scared to death.'

'Stands to reason. You'd have to be crazy not to be after what happened.' And then he looked at her thoughtfully.
'How did it feel?'

'So good, Josh.' She just closed her eyes and grinned. 'Like I was a normal person again.' The grin faded as she looked into his wise old eyes. 'It's been a long time.'
'Yeah.' He scratched his chin. 'But I keep thinkin', it don't have to be a long time anymore. Sam, you could come back here, and you could get back into ranchin' . . .'
He had thought about it all night, but now she looked at him pensively, her head cocked to one side.

'You want to know what I've been thinking?' He nodded. 'Charlie and I talked about it in New York, and maybe it's totally crazy. But I wonder if, maybe, I could turn this into a special ranch, for'—she hesitated, not sure how to say it—'people like me. Kids mostly, but some grown-ups. Teach them to ride, help them get back to a normal life. Josh, I can't even begin to tell you what it just

felt like. Here, in the chair, I'm different and I always will be. But up on that horse, I'm no different than I used to be. Oh, maybe a little, but I won't be once I get used to riding again. Imagine showing people that, giving them horses to ride, teaching them . . .' She didn't notice but there were tears in his eyes and her own as she spoke. He was nodding slowly, glancing around at the buildings.

'We'd have to make some changes, but we could do it . . .'

'Would you help me?'

He nodded slowly. 'I don't know much about . . . about . . .' He tried to be tactful, he had been about to say cripples. 'About people like that, but hell, I know horses, and I could teach a blind man to ride if I had to. Had my kids ridin' by the time they was three.' She knew it was true too, and he had just been as patient and as loving as any therapist she had worked with. 'You know, Sam, we could do it. Hell, I'd sure like to try it.'

'So would I. But I have to think it over. It would take some money, and I'd have to have therapists and nurses and doctors, people would have to be willing to trust me with their children, and why should they?' But she was talking more to herself than to Josh, and a moment later Charlie and Mellie interrupted them to ask Josh more questions about the ranch.

Sunday morning came too quickly, and they all looked regretful as they said good-bye. Josh was almost heart-broken as he took Sam's hand before they left for the airport and squeezed it with a thousand questions written on his face. 'Well? You goin' to keep it?' If not, he knew that he might never see her again. And he couldn't let that happen. He wanted to help her to find herself, and to build the ranch for special kids. He had sensed in the past few days how lonely and hurt she was.

'I don't know yet, Josh.' She answered him honestly. 'I have to do some research, and to think it over. I promise I'll let you know as soon as I make up my mind.'

'How soon do you think that will be?'

'Has another job come up for you?' She looked worried.
'If I said yes,' he said, grinning softly, 'would that make you jealous enough to keep it?'

She laughed in answer. 'You're a sly one.'

His face sobered. 'I just don't want to see you give up this ranch.'

'I don't want to either, Josh. But I just don't know enough about ranching to make it worth it. The only thing that makes sense is if we do what we said.'

'Well, why don't we?'

'Give me a chance to think it over.'

'You do that.' And then he leaned down and gave her a bear hug and turned to say good-bye to Charlie and

nda and the three boys.

They waved good-bye to him for as long as they could get him, and in comparison to the trip out, it was a very short trip back. The boys were exhausted and disappointed that they were going back to New York. Charlie and Mellic alternated sleeping on part of the trip, and Sam was pensive all the way to New York. She had a lot to think about, about whether she herself could make it, about whether selling the livestock on the ranch would give her enough money to make the improvements, about whether or not it was what she wanted. Was she really ready to leave the safety of her life in New York? She had been so engrossed in the makings of her decision that all the way home she had barely thought of Tate.

She left Charlie and Mellic in the lobby of their building and disappeared into her apartment to make some notes, and she still looked preoccupied the next morning at the office when Charlie knocked on her door.

'Well, cowgirl, make up your mind yet?'

'Shhhh!' She put a finger to her lips and beckoned him in. No one else knew in the office and she particularly didn't want Harvey to know yet. Not until she was sure.

'What are you going to do, Sam?' He threw himself down on the couch and grinned at her. 'Want to know what I would do if I were you?'

'No.' She tried to look forbidding, but he always made

her laugh. 'I want to make up my own mind.'

'That's smart. Just don't make any mistakes and tell your mother what you're considering. She'd probably have you locked up in the nut house.'

'Maybe she'd be right.'

'Hardly. Or at least not for those reasons.' He smiled at Sam and sat up just as Harvey's secretary appeared in the doorway.

'Miss Taylor?'

'Yes?' Sam turned to face her.

'Mr. Maxwell would like to see you.'

'God himself?' Charlie looked impressed and went back to his office as Sam followed Harvey's secretary down the hall.

And when she reached his office, she found him looking tired and pensive. There was a mountain of papers on his desk and he only glanced at Samantha as he finished some notes. 'Hi, Sam.'

'Hi, Harvey, what's up?' It was another minute before he turned his attention to her, and he went over the amenities before getting down to the reason she had been called.

'How was Thanksgiving?'

'Very nice. Yours?'

'Fine. How did you spend it?' It was a loaded question and Sam felt suddenly nervous.

'With the Petersons.'

'That's nice. At their place or yours?'

'Mine.' But it was truthful, she reassured herself. The ranch was hers now after all.

'That's terrific, Sam.' He smiled at her. 'You're really doing amazingly well.'

'Thank you.' It was a compliment that meant a lot to her, and for a moment they exchanged smiles.

'Which brings me to why I called you into the office this morning. You haven't given me your answer.' He looked expectant and Samantha sighed and slumped back in her chair.

'I know I haven't. Harvey . . . I feel awful about the-

but I just needed time to think.'

'Is it really a choice?' He looked surprised. What choice did she have after all? 'If you're still worried about the travel, all you have to do is hire a competent assistant'—he grinned at her—'like I did, and you'll be all set. The rest you can certainly handle. Hell, Sam, you've been doing my job and your own for years now!' He was teasing but she wagged a finger at him.

'Now you admit it! I should ask you to sign a statement to that effect.'

'Not on your life. Come on, Sam, get me off the hook. Give me an answer.' He sat back and smiled at her. 'I want to go home.'

'The bitch of it is, Harvey,' she said, looking at him sadly, 'so do I.'

But it was obvious that he didn't understand her. 'But this is your home, Sam.'

She shook her head slowly. 'No, Harvey, I just realised something this weekend. It's not.'

'You're unhappy at CHL?' He looked shocked. That possibility hadn't even occurred to him. Did she mean that she wanted to quit?

But she quickly shook her head. 'No, I'm not unhappy. Not here . . . but . . . well . . . I don't know if I can explain it, but it has to do with New York.'

'Sam.' He held up a hand to stop her. 'I'm warning you, if you've come in here to tell me that you're moving to Atlanta with your mother, I will go into shock. Call my doctor now if that's what you're going to tell me.' She could only laugh in answer and shake her head again.

'No, it is most certainly not that.'

'Then what is it?'

'I've been holding out on you, Harvey.' She looked guiltily at her boss of ten years. 'My friend Caroline left me her ranch.'

'Left it to you?' He looked startled. 'Are you going to sell it?'

Samantha shook her head slowly. 'I don't think so. That's just it.'

'You're not going to keep it, Sam, are you? What could you possibly do with it?'

'A lot of things.' And then, as she looked at him, she knew her answer. 'It's just something I have to do. Maybe I won't be able to do it, maybe it'll be too much for me, maybe it'll be a terrible fiasco, but I just want to give it a try. I want to set it up as a place to teach handicapped kids to ride, teach them how to be independent, to cover ground in something other than a wheelchair—on a horse.' Harvey was looking thoughtfully at her. 'You think I'm crazy, don't you?'

He smiled sadly. 'No, I was wishing that you were my daughter. Because I would wish you luck, and give you all the money I have and tell you to do it. I wish I could tell you that I think you're crazy, Sam, but I don't. It's a long way from being a creative director on Madison Avenue though. Are you sure that's what you want?'

'The funny thing is that I wasn't sure. Until right now when I told you, but now I know. I am sure.' And then with a small sigh. 'What are you going to do about the job? Give it to Charlie?' He thought for a minute and nodded.

'I guess so. He'll do a good job.'

'Are you sure you want to retire, Harvey?' But she had to admit that he looked ready and that she would do the same thing in his place.

He nodded, looking at her. 'Yes, Sam, I'm sure. As sure as you are about your ranch, which is to say that I want to retire and it's always a little scary to deal with the unknown. You never know for sure that you're doing the right thing.'

'I guess not.'

'Think Charlie will want the job?'

'He'll be thrilled.'

'Then it's his. Because it has to be like that. You have to want to work fifteen hours a day, take it home on the weekends, louse up your vacations, eat, sleep, and drink commercials. I just don't want that anymore.'

'Neither do I. But Charlie does.'

'Then go tell him he has a new job, or should I?'
'Would you let me do it?' It was the last thing she would do at CHL that would mean something to her.
'Why not? You're his closest friend.' And then he looked at Sam sadly. 'How soon are you leaving us?'

'What would be reasonable?'
'Why don't I leave that up to you.'
'First of the year?' It was in five weeks. That was a reasonable notice, and Harvey seemed to think so too.

'We'll retire together then. Maggie and I may even come to visit you on the ranch. My advanced age should be sufficient handicap for us to qualify as guests.'
'Bull.' She moved her wheelchair around his desk and came over to kiss his cheek. 'You'll never be that old, Harvey, not until you're a hundred and three.'

'That happens to be next week.' He put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her. 'I'm proud of you, Sam. You're quite a girl.' And then he coughed in embarrassment, fumbled on his desk, and waved her out. 'Now go tell Charlie he has a new job.'

Without saying anything further, she left his office and rolled her way down the hall, wearing a broad smile. She stopped in the doorway of Charlie's office, which was in its usual state of chaos, and she barged in on him as he attempted to find his tennis racket under the couch. He had a date to play lunchtime, and all he could find were the balls.

'What are you looking for, slobbo? I don't know how you find anything in this mess.'

'Huh?' He emerged, but only briefly. 'Oh, it's you. I don't. You don't happen to have a spare tennis racket, do you?' Only from Charlie could she take jokes like that.

'Sure. I play twice a week. Ice skating too. And cha-cha lessons.'

'Oh, shut up. You're disgusting. What's the matter? Don't you have any decency, any taste?' He eyed her with mock outrage and she started laughing.

'Speaking of which, you'd better buy some of both, you're going to need them.'

'What?' He looked blank.

'Taste.'

'Why? I've never needed taste before.'

'You were never creative director of a large ad agency before.' He stared at her, not comprehending.

'What are you saying?' His heart pounded for a moment. But it couldn't be. Harvey was offering the job to Samantha . . . unless . . . 'Sam?'

'You heard me, Mr. Creative Director.' She beamed at him.

'Sam . . . ? Sam!' He jumped to his feet. 'Did he — am I?'

'He did. And you are.'

'But what about you?' He looked shocked. Had they passed her over for the job? If that was the case, he wouldn't take it. They would both quit, they could open up shop together, they could . . .

She could see his mind racing and held up a hand. 'Relax. The job is yours. Me, I'm going to California, Charlie, to run a ranch for handicapped children. And if you're real nice to me, maybe I'll let you and the kids come and visit me in the summers and—' He didn't let her finish. Instead he ran to her and hugged her tight. 'Oh, Sam, you did it! You did it! When did you decide?' He was as thrilled for her as he was for himself. He was almost jumping up and down like a kid.

'I don't know.' She was laughing as he held her. 'I think just now in Harvey's office . . . or last night on the plane . . . or yesterday morning when I talked to Josh . . . I don't know when it happened, Charlie. But I did it.'

'When are you going out?'

'When you get your new job. On January first.'

'My God, Sam, does he really mean it? Creative director? Me? But I'm only thirty-seven.'

'It's all right,' she reassured him. 'You look fifty.'

'Gee, thanks.' He was still beaming as he reached for the phone to call his wife.

'So? How is it going? When do you open?' Charlie called her every week, to cry on her shoulder about all the work on his desk and find out about the progress at the ranch.

'We open in two weeks, Charlie.'

'What is that? Like a bank? You give out toasters and balloons and party hats?'

She smiled into the phone. For the past five months he had done nothing but encourage, and it had been a long haul. In the course of a lifetime five months was nothing, but her working sixteen and eighteen hours a day made it seem like ten years. They had torn down small buildings, put up new sheds, altered cottages, put in ramps, built a swimming pool, sold the livestock for the most part, except for a handful of cows to give them milk and to amuse the kids. There had been therapists to hire, nurses to see, doctors to contact, and then inevitably there had been the travelling. Sam had flown to Denver to see the doctor who had first operated on her back, to Phoenix, to Los Angeles, and to San Francisco, and then finally to Dallas and Houston, and in each city she had seen the top orthopaedic men. She had hired a secretary to travel with her, which made it easier for her and made it look more businesslike. She wanted to explain her programme to the doctors, so that they would refer patients to her, children who would spend four to six weeks on the ranch, learning to enjoy life again, to ride horses, to be with other children with similar disabilities, and to be independent of their parents and able to take care of themselves.

In her presentation she showed photographs of the ranch as it had been and architectural renderings of what it was going to be. She detailed the facilities and the plans for physical therapy, and gave résumés of the staff and

detailed references for herself. And everywhere she went, she got a warm reception, and the doctors were impressed. All of them referred her to other doctors, most of them invited her to their homes to meet their wives and families. And in Houston she could even have had a date, but she declined graciously, and still won the doctor over. By the time she had finished her travels, she was certain that at least forty-seven doctors in six cities were going to refer patients to her ranch.

She still called it the Lord Ranch and she had kept on a handful of the old cowboys. Josh was, as promised, made the foreman, and she had even given him a bronze plaque to put on his front door, and he had been thrilled. But what she needed was a new breed of ranch hands, and she and Josh had picked them all carefully, for their attitudes about children, about handicaps, about horses. She didn't want anyone too old, or impatient, or ornery, or willing to take risks with the children or the horses. Just hiring the men had taken them almost two months. But she had a dozen ranch hands now, two of them from the old days, and the other ten all new. Her favourite among them was a broad-shouldered, handsome, redheaded, green-eyed 'young'un,' as Josh called him, named Jeff. He was shy and closed up about his own life, but he was always willing to talk for hours about what they were going to do with the ranch. His references told her that at twenty-four he had been working on ranches since he was sixteen, and in eight years he had been on five ranches in three states. When she asked him why, he said only that he used to travel a lot with his father, but now he was on his own, and when she called the last two ranches he had worked at, they told her to do anything she had to to hang on to him, and if he didn't stay with her, send him back to them. So Jeff Pickett became assistant foreman, and Josh was pleased with his new team.

The only problem Sam had had for a while had been the money she needed, but it was amazing what could happen if you really wanted something badly enough, and she did.

been absorbed by the alterations on the ranch within the first few weeks. After that the sale of the cattle had been a big help, and then Josh had come up with an idea to help her. They weren't going to need a lot of the fancier pieces of ranch equipment anymore, tools and tractors and trucks to transport the cattle, so she sold those and that paid for six new cottages and the swimming pool. After that she began to look into grants and discovered a wealth of untapped resources she hadn't considered, and once she'd got three of those, she applied for a loan at the bank.

Only a month before, Harvey called her from Palm Springs, where he and Maggie were on vacation while he played golf in a tournament with some old friends, and he had asked if they could come and see her, and when they had, he had insisted that he wanted to invest fifty thousand dollars in her ranch. It was just over the final amount she needed, and it was a godsend for her, as she told him when he wrote the cheque. And now she was going to be all right until they opened, and hopefully after that, within a year or two they'd be in the black and totally self-supporting. She didn't want to get rich on what she was doing. She just wanted to make enough money to be comfortable and support the ranch.

The opening date, as she now told Charlie, was June 7, and in a few days the rest of the physical therapists would be arriving, along with some new horses. The Jacuzzis were all installed, the pool looked terrific, the cabins were cosy, and she already had reservations for thirty-six kids over the next two months.

'When can I come?'

'I don't know, love, anytime you want. Or maybe, just give me a chance to catch my breath after we get started. I think I'm going to have my hands full for a while.'

As it turned out, that was the understatement of the century. She hadn't counted on being nearly as busy as she was. She was snowed under every morning, after they opened, with mountains of paperwork, letters from doctors, requests from parents, and she spent the entire afternoon teaching children, with Josh. One of the grants

had gone toward having special saddles made for the children. They had fifty now, and had already applied for another grant for another fifty saddles, which Sam suspected they would soon need. Her patience with the children proved to be endless, as she taught them in groups of two or three. And invariably each time, after the initial terror as they sat there clutching the pommel, the horse would begin to walk as Josh led them, and the feeling of freedom and movement and actually walking would so completely overwhelm the children that they would squeal with glee. Sam never got over her own feeling of excitement and jubilation as she watched them, and time and again she watched Josh and the other cowboys stealthily brush away a tear.

All the children seemed to love her and, as the old ranch hands had more than two years before, they began calling her Palomino because of her sun-bleached fair hair. Suddenly everywhere on the ranch were shouts of 'Palomino! . . . Palomino!' as she wheeled herself about, checking on children in therapy, at the pool, making their beds, or sweeping their rooms in the pretty little cottages. Sam kept an eye on them everywhere, and at night, in the main hall where everyone ate now, including Samantha, there were endless discussions about who would sit at her table, who would sit at her right or her left, and at the campfire, who would get to hold her hand. The oldest child there was a boy of sixteen, who had arrived surly and hostile from twelve operations over nineteen months, after injuring his spinal cord in a motorcycle accident in which his older brother had been killed. But after four weeks on the ranch he was like a new person. Redheaded Jeff had become his mentor, and the boy and he had become fast friends. The youngest was a little girl of seven, with enormous blue eyes, easy tears, and a lisp. Her name was Betty and she had been born with stumps instead of legs and she was still a little afraid of horses, but she was having a great time with the other kids.

Sometimes when she looked around herself in amazement, as the summer wore on and the number of

grew, Sam marvelled at the fact that the handicaps didn't upset her. There had been a time in her life when only perfection seemed normal and when she wouldn't have known how to handle any of the problems that were now part of the ordinary day: children who wouldn't cooperate, artificial limbs that didn't fit, diapers for boys of fourteen, wheelchairs that got stuck, braces that broke. The mechanics of it all sometimes struck her as extraordinary, but most extraordinary of all was that it had become a way of life. And for a woman who had once longed for children, her prayers had been answered: by the end of August she had fifty-three. And now a new aspect had been added. They had bought a specially equipped van, with yet another grant, and made arrangements with the local school, so that after Labour Day the children who came to her, or stayed on, would go to school. For many of them it would be a reintroduction to schooling with normal children, and it was a good place for them to make the adjustments before they went back to their hometowns. There was almost nothing that Sam hadn't thought of, and when Charlie and Mellie came out in late August, they were absolutely stunned by what they saw.

'Has anyone done an article about you yet, Sam?' Charlie was enthralled as he watched a group of advanced senior riders cantering back from an afternoon on the hills. The children, for the most part, loved the horses, and even the horses had been specially picked by Sam and Josh for their docility and the steadiness that they showed.

But now, in answer to Charlie's question, she shook her head. 'I don't want any publicity, Charlie.'

'Why not?' Living in the vortex of visibility in New York, he was surprised.

'I don't know. I like it this way, I guess. Nice and quiet. I don't want to show off. I just want to help the kids.'

'I'd say you're doing that.' He beamed at her as Mellie chased baby Sam down the road. 'I've never seen kids look so happy. They love it, don't they?'

'I hope so.'

They did, as did the parents, the doctors, and the people who worked there. What Sam had done had been a dream come true. It gave the children all the independence Sam had hoped to give them, gave the parents new hope for their children, gave the doctors a kind of gift to brokenhearted parents and children, and it gave the people who worked there a new meaning to their lives that they'd never had before. And most of the time they got children who made it all worth it. Now and then they got one whom even the most devoted therapists and counselors, and even Sam's loving efforts, couldn't help. There were those who just weren't ready or who didn't want help yet, or maybe never would. It was difficult to accept that they couldn't help a child, but they did their best nonetheless as long as the child stayed.

Amazingly enough, despite the magnitude of the handicaps with which they were dealing, it was always a happy place filled with laughter and smiling faces and squeals of delight. Sam herself had never been as happy and relaxed in her entire lifetime, and now when she met ranchers, or ran into ranch hands, or interviewed new personnel, she asked no questions except about the business at hand. Her endless, hopeless, fruitless search for Tate had finally been put to rest. And she accepted with an equanimity that still upset Charlie, the fact that she would be alone for the rest of her life, running the ranch, and being with 'her kids.' It seemed to be all she wanted, and now and then Josh thought it was a damn shame. At thirty-two she was an extravagantly beautiful woman, and it pained him to think that she was alone. But none of the men who crossed her path seemed to intrigue her and she was always careful not to offer encouragement or innuendos when she met single fathers of new campers, or therapists or doctors. One sensed with Sam that her love life no longer existed, that for her it was a closed door. Yet it was difficult to feel sorry for her, surrounded as she was by children who adored her and whom she seemed genuinely to love.

It was in October that she was called to her office on an

unusually warm day to see a new child coming in who was something of an exception. He had just been referred to the Lord Ranch by a judge in L.A. who had heard of what Sam was doing, and the child's 'tuition' was to be paid by the courts. Sam knew that he was expected that morning, and she also knew that there were special circumstances regarding him, but the social worker had told her on the phone that he would explain it all to her when they arrived. She was intrigued by the nature of the new referral, but she had had some work to do with Josh that morning and she didn't want to wait in her office. She had a lot to do before the kids came back from school. There were currently sixty-one staying at the ranch. In her own mind she had already decided that eventually a hundred and ten would be their limit, but in the meantime they still had room to grow.

But when Jeff came to find her out near the Jacuzzi, talking to Josh, he wore an odd expression, and when she got back to her office, she saw why. In a small broken wheelchair sat a shrunken blond child with huge blue eyes, his arms were covered with bruises, and he was clutching a ragged teddy bear. As Sam saw him she almost stopped, because he looked so different from the others. For the past five months she had seen nothing but handicapped children, they had cried, they had wailed, they had argued, they had sulked, they had pouted on arrival. They didn't want to go to school, they were afraid of horses, they didn't see why they had to make their own beds now, but no matter how much they grouched and eventually adjusted, what they all had in common was that they were all children who had been lavishly taken care of, almost pampered, by parents who loved them and were heartbroken at what had been dealt to them by the Fates. Never before had there been a child on the ranch who was so clearly unloved, so obviously bruised in spirit as well as in body, as this one, and as Sam wheeled her chair up closer to talk to him and held out her hands, he cowered from her and began to wail. She glanced quickly at the social worker, and then back at the child clutching

his teddy bear, and spoke softly.

'It's okay, Timmie. No one's going to hurt you. My name's Sam. And this is Jeff.' She waved at the young redhead, but Timmie squeezed his eyes shut and cried more. 'Are you scared?' It was the merest whisper in her softest voice, and after a minute he nodded and opened one eye. 'I was scared when I first came here too. Before I got hurt, I used to ride all the time, but I was afraid of the horses at first when I got here. Is that what you're scared of?' He shook his head vigorously. 'You're not?' He shook his head again. 'Then what are you scared of?' He opened the other eye and regarded her with terror. 'Come on, you can tell me.'

It was a tiny broken whisper as he stared at her. 'You.'

Sam was shocked, and with her eyes she signalled Jeff and the social worker and her secretary to back off. They wandered slowly across the room. 'Why are you afraid of me, Timmie? I won't hurt you. I'm in a wheelchair just like you.'

He looked at her for a while and then nodded. 'How come?'

'I got hurt in an accident.' She no longer told them that she was thrown by a horse. It didn't serve her purposes, trying to introduce them to riding. 'But I'm okay now. I can do lots of things.'

'Me too. I can cook my own dinner.' Did he have to? she suddenly wondered. Who was this child and why was he so battered and bruised?

'What do you like to cook for dinner?'

'Spaghetti. It comes in a can.'

'We have spaghetti here too.'

He nodded sadly. 'I know. They always have spaghetti in jail.'

Sam's heart reached out to him and she gently reached out and took his hand. This time he let her, though the other one still clung tightly to his bedraggled bear. 'Did you think this was like jail?' He nodded. 'It's not. It's kind of like camp. Did you ever go to camp?' He shook his head, and she noticed that he looked more like four than

six, which she knew he was. She also knew that he'd had polio when he was a year old. It had totally crippled both legs and hips.

'My mum is in jail.' He volunteered the information.

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

He nodded again. 'She got ninety days.'

'Is that why you're here?' Where was his father . . . his grandma . . . anyone, someone who loved this child? It was the first admission she'd ever had that upset her. She wanted to shake someone for what they'd done to the boy.

'Will you stay with us the whole time she's gone?'

'Maybe.'

'Would you like to learn to ride a horse?'

'Maybe.'

'I could teach you. I love horses, and we've got some real pretty ones. You could pick out one that you like.' Right now there were still a dozen left unassigned. Each child always rode the same horse for his entire stay at the ranch. 'How about that, Timmie?'

'Uh-huh . . . yeah . . .' But he was glancing nervously at Jeff. 'Who's that?'

'That's Jeff.'

'Is he a cop?'

'No.' She decided to speak his language. 'We don't have any cops here. He just helps with the horses and the kids.'

'Does he beat kids?'

'No.' She looked shocked, and then she reached out and touched his face. 'No one here will ever hurt you, Timmie. Never. I promise.' He nodded, but it was obvious that he thought it was a lie. 'As a matter of fact, how about if you and I stick together for a while, huh? You could watch me teach riding, and we could swim in the pool.'

'You got a pool?' The eyes began to light up.

'We sure do.' But the first pool she wanted to get him in was the bathtub. He was filthy from head to foot. He looked like he hadn't had a bath in weeks. 'Would you like to see your room?'

He shrugged, but she could see that interest was dawning, and with a small smile she handed him a

colouring book and some crayons and told him to wait there. 'Where are you going?' He looked at her with suspicion and fresh fear.

'I think the man who brought you here wants me to sign some papers. I'll do that and then I'll take you to your room and show you the pool. Okay?'

'Okay.' He began to pull out the crayons and she crossed the room in her wheelchair and signalled to the social worker to join her in her secretary's office. In a whisper she asked Jeff to stay.

The social worker was a tired man in his late forties. He had seen it all by now, and this kid was no worse than the rest. But a child in Timmie's condition was new to Sam.

'Good Lord, who's been taking care of him?'

'No one. His mother went to jail two weeks ago, and the neighbours thought he had been sent somewhere else. The mother never even told the cops about him when they picked her up. He's just been sitting around in the apartment, watching TV and eating out of cans. We talked to his mother though.' He sighed and lit a cigarette. 'She's a heroin addict. She's been in and out of jail for years, in and out of treatment centres and hospitals and God knows what. The kid was a trick baby, and she never got him any of his shots. Hence the polio.' The social worker looked annoyed and Sam looked confused.

'I'm sorry. What is a "trick baby"?' He didn't look like any trick to her, that child was real. But the social worker smiled.

'I forget that there are any decent people left who don't know expressions like that. A trick baby is a child conceived by a prostitute. She doesn't know the father. He was a "trick," a "john," whatever. Charming, isn't it?'

'Why is she allowed to retain custody? Why don't the courts take him away from her?'

'They might. I think the judge is considering it this time. In fact she's thinking of giving him up. She considers herself one of the early Christian martyrs, being stuck with a crippled kid, having taken care of him for six years, she's had it.' He hesitated for a moment and then looked Sam in

the eye. 'I might as well tell you, there's also a question of child abuse here. The bruises on his arms—she beat him with an umbrella. Almost broke the kid's back.'

'Oh, my God, and they'd even consider giving him back to her?'

'She's been rehabilitated now.' He said it with all the cynicism that went with his job. Sam had never been exposed to anything like it before.

'Has he had any psychiatric help?'

The social worker shook his head. 'Our assessment of him is that he's normal, except for his legs of course. But mentally, he's all right. As all right as any of them are.' Sam wanted to scream at him, how all right could he be if his mother had been beating him with an umbrella? The child was terrified. She had already seen that much. 'Anyway, she's been in for two weeks, and with time off for good behaviour and credit for time served, she'll be out in two months. You got him for sixty days.' Like an animal, like a car, like a rental. Rent-a-Kid. Rent-a-Cripple. It made Sam feel sick.

'And after that?'

'She gets him back unless the court decides otherwise or she doesn't want him. I don't know, maybe you could keep him as a foster child, if you want to.'

'Can't he be adopted by decent people?'

'Not unless she gives up custody, and you can't force her to do that. Besides'—the social worker shrugged—'who's going to adopt a kid in a wheelchair? Any way you look at it, he's going to wind up in an institution.' 'Jail,' as Timmie had already said himself. What a grim life for a six-year-old child.

Sam looked sorrowful as the social worker walked to the door. 'We're happy to have him. And I'll keep him longer if necessary. Whether the court pays or not.' The social worker nodded.

'Let us know if you have any problems. We can always keep him in juvenile hall till she gets out.'

'Isn't that like jail?' Sam looked horrified and he shrugged again.

'More or less. What else do you think we can do with them while their parents are in jail? Send them to camp?' But the beauty of it was that they just had.

Sam turned the chair around and went back into her own office, where Timmie had torn a page out of the colouring book and scribbled across it relentlessly in brown.

'Okay, Timmie, all set?'

'Where's the cop?' He sounded like a little gangster and Sam laughed.

'He's gone. And he's not a cop, he's a social worker.'

'Same thing.'

'Well, anyway, let's get you to your room.' She attempted to get his chair going for him but it locked every few feet and one of the sides had fallen down. 'How do you get anywhere in this thing, Timmie?'

He looked at her strangely. 'I never go out.'

'Never?' She looked shocked again. 'Not even with your mother?'

'She never takes me out. She sleeps a lot. She's very tired.' I'll bet, Sam thought. If she was a heroin addict, she must have slept a hell of a lot.

'I see. Well, it seems to me that the first thing you're going to need is a new chair.' That was one commodity they didn't have. They didn't have any spare chairs, but she kept a narrow extra one in the back of her station wagon, in case anything ever happened to her own. 'I've got one you can use for now. It'll be a little big, but we'll get you a new one by tomorrow. Jeff—she smiled at the young redhead—'can you get me my spare chair? It's in the back of my car.'

'Sure.' He was back five minutes later and Timmie was ensconced in the big grey chair, as Sam wheeled along beside him, helping him with the wheels.

As they wheeled past the other buildings, she explained to him what everything was, and they stopped at the corral for a few minutes so that he could look at the horses, and as he did he stared at one of the horses and then at Sam's hair. 'That one looks like you.'

'I know. Some of the other kids call me Palomino. That kind of horse is a palomino.'

'Is that what you are?' For a minute he looked amused.

'Sometimes I like to pretend that I am. Do you ever pretend stuff like that?' Sadly he shook his head and they drove on to his room. Now she was especially grateful that she had reserved him this particular room. It was big and sunny and all done in blue and yellow. There was a big cheerful bedspread and there were drawings of horses in frames on the walls.

'Whose is this?' He looked frightened again as she wheeled him into the room.

'Yours. While you're here.'

'Mine?' The eyes were as big as saucers. 'You mean it?'

'I mean it.' There was a desk, without a chair, a chest of drawers, and a little table where he could play games. He had his own bathroom, and there was a special speaker in case he got in trouble and needed help from one of the counsellors nearby. 'Do you like it?'

All he could say was 'Wow!'

She showed him the chest of drawers and then told him that that was where he could put his things.

'What things?' He looked blank. 'I don't have any things.'

'Didn't you bring a suitcase with some clothes?' She suddenly realised that she hadn't seen one.

'Nope.' He looked down at the spotted T-shirt that had once been blue. 'This is all I've got. And Teddy.' He squeezed the bear tight.

'Tell you what.' Sam glanced at Jeff and then back at Timmie. 'Right now we'll borrow you some stuff, and then I'll go into town later and get you some jeans and stuff. Okay?'

'Sure.' He didn't seem to care one way or the other, he was happy with his room.

'Now, about a bath.' She wheeled herself into the sunny bathroom and turned on the tap after flicking a special switch at a comfortable level that would close the drain. Everything had been specially installed. And the john had

hand bars on each side. 'And if you want to use the toilet, all you have to do is push this button and someone will come and help.'

He stared at her, not comprehending. 'Why do I have to take a bath?'

'Because it's a nice thing to do.'

'You gonna do it?'

'I could have Jeff do it if you like.' She wasn't sure if at six he'd be modest, but he wasn't and now he vehemently shook his head.

'Uh-huh. You.'

'Okay.' For her this was a new adventure. It had only taken her ten months to learn how to bathe herself, but to bathe a child from a wheelchair, that was going to be something new.

She sent Jeff off to find clothes that would fit Timmie, rolled up her sleeves, and told him how to get himself in, but when he slipped and she tried to grab him, they both almost wound up on the floor. In the end she managed to get him into the bathtub, wound up soaked herself, and as she helped haul him out, she got him into the chair she had lent him just in time to lose her balance and fall out of her own. And for some reason she found herself on the floor, looking up at him and laughing as he laughed down at her too.

'Pretty silly, huh?'

'I thought you were supposed to teach me how to do it.'

'Well, there are other people here who do that.' She hoisted herself carefully off the wet floor and back into her chair.

'What do you do?'

'Teach riding.'

He nodded and she found herself wondering what he was thinking, but mostly she was grateful that he no longer seemed to be afraid of her, and when Jeff brought them the clothes he had borrowed from various cabins, Timmie almost looked like a new child. But she was soaking wet from his bath and she had to go back to her room to change. 'Want to come see my house?' Hesitantly

he nodded, and after she helped him dress, she led the way. There was an easily accessible ramp into the big house now, and he followed her into the living room and down the hall to her bedroom, while she pulled some fresh jeans and a shirt out of the closet, which had been entirely rebuilt for her. She kept Caroline's old room as her best guest room, but she almost never used it, and visited it as seldom as she had to. It still pained her to feel its emptiness without her old friend.

'You got a nice house.' Timmie was looking around with interest. The teddy bear had come with him too. 'Who sleeps in the other rooms?'

'No one.'

'Don't you have kids?' He looked amazed.

'No. Except all the kids who live here on the ranch with me.'

'You got a husband?' It was a question a lot of the children asked her and she always smiled and said no, and it ended there.

'Nope.'

'Why not? You're pretty.'

'Thank you. I just don't.'

'Do you wanna get married?'

She sighed softly as she looked at the beautiful blond child. He was actually very pretty now that he was clean. 'I don't think I do want to get married, Timmie. I lead kind of a special life.'

'So does my mum.' He nodded his understanding, and Sam was at first shocked and then laughed but she couldn't say 'Not like that.'

She tried to explain her views to him. 'I just think I wouldn't have enough time for a husband with the ranch and you kids here and stuff.'

But he was looking at her intently, and then waved at her chair. 'Is it because of that?' What he had just asked her hit her like a punch in the stomach, because it was the truth, but she couldn't admit it, not to anyone, and barely to herself.

'No, it's not because of that.' But she wondered if he

knew she was lying, and then, without giving him time to ask her more questions, she ushered him back outside. They visited the stables and the main hall, looked at two cows in a pen, and went to the swimming pool, where she took him for a quick swim before lunch. There were only a few younger children on the ranch at that hour of the day in October. The others were all in school, having been dropped off by the huge adjusted school bus that Sam had bought to get the kids there. But the children who were around greeted Timmie with warmth and interest, and when the others got back at three thirty, he was hardly even shy. He watched them have their riding lessons, swoop down on the pool in their wheelchairs, and chase each other down the wide well-paved walks. He met Josh and solemnly shook his hand, and watched Samantha during all her lessons, and when she was finished, he was still standing by.

'You still here, Timmie? I thought you'd have gone back to your room.' He only shook his head, holding on to his teddy bear with big eyes. 'Want to come back to my house before dinner?' He nodded and reached out for her hand, and hand in hand, they wheeled back to the big house where she read him stories until the big old school bell sounded, and it was time to go eat.

'Can I sit with you, Sam?' Once again he looked worried, and she reassured him. But she suspected that by now he was tired after his long first day at the ranch. He sat beside her at dinner, yawning loudly, and before dessert had arrived, she turned to see that his little chin had dropped onto his chest and he was slumped in a corner of the big grey wheelchair. The teddy bear was still clutched in his arms, and she smiled gently and took off her heavy sweater, settled it around him like a blanket, and left the table to take him home. In his room she gently lifted him from the chair to the bed with one powerful smooth gesture, her own arms had gained much strength from the constant use she got. She took off his clothes and he stirred gently, and turned off the light, a

and hair. For a brief moment
ended of Charlie's children, of the sweet
g blue eyes, and she suddenly remembered that her
onging she had felt when she had first held their li
baby, little Samantha, and how she had known then t
it was a void that, in her life, would never be filled. 'S
now, as she looked at Timmie, she felt her heart reach
and embrace him as though he had been her child
stirred gently as she kissed his forehead, and whisp
'Good night, Mummy . . . I love you . . .' Sam felt
spring to her eyes. They were words she would sud
have given her life for, and then, with head bowe
wheeled out of the cabin and closed the door.

34

By the end of the first month Timmie was riding the pretty
little palomino. Her name was Daisy and he loved her the
way any little boy would have loved his first horse. But far
more than the palomino, he loved Samantha, with a
passion that startled everyone with its vehemence and
strength. He appeared at the big house every morning,
knocked on the door, and waited for her to come and
answer it. Sometimes it took her longer than others,
because sometimes she was already making coffee and
sometimes she was still in bed. But the moment he saw
her, his face lit up like a sunburst, and as he wheeled in the
chair that she had bought him, he always looked around
him, like a puppy who's been kept outdoors all night.
They had a comfortable early morning patter. Sometimes
he told her what he'd dreamed about, or what one of the
kids had done at breakfast, or what the palomino had been
doing when Timmie sped past the corral in his chair to bid
the gentle horse good morning. And Samantha told him

what she would be doing that morning, they'd talk about his riding lesson, and once or twice she inquired if he had changed his mind about school, but he remained adamant on that subject. He wanted to stay on the ranch, not go to school with the others, and Samantha figured that for the first month at least she would let him settle in.

The bruises that his mother had inflicted upon him had long since faded, and the social worker called once a week to see how Timmie was, and when at the end of the month he came out to see them, he looked from Timmie to Samantha and then back again, and he was clearly stunned.

'What in God's name did you do to him?' he asked her when they were finally alone. Prying Timmie from Sam's side wasn't easy, but she had sent him to check on Daisy and tell Josh that they would be riding in a few minutes to show the social worker how well he had done. 'He looks like a different child.'

'He is a different child,' Sam said proudly. 'He's a child who's been loved and it shows.'

But the social worker only looked at her sadly. 'You know how hard you've made it for him?' She thought he was joking and she started to smile but she saw then that he meant it and knit her brows.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you know what it'll be like for him to go back to an apartment in a tenement with a drug-addict mother who feeds him stale crackers and beer?'

Sam took a deep breath and stared out of the window. She wanted to say something to him. But she didn't know if it was the right time. 'I wanted to talk to you about that, Mr. Pfizer.' She turned to face him again. 'What about the possibilities of not sending him back?'

'And keep him here?' She nodded, but he started to shake his head. 'I don't think the judge would buy that. The courts are paying for it right now, but it was just kind of a trial thing, you know . . .'

'I don't mean like that.' She took another deep breath and decided to ask him. What could she lose? Nothing.

And she might win everything . . . everything . . . For the third time in her life, Sam had fallen in love. And this time not with a man, but with a six-year-old boy. She loved him as she had never loved another human being, with a kind of depth and feeling she had never suspected that she had, as though some sort of well had reached right past her heart into her spirit and now she was able to give him all she had to give. And there was a lot of loving left over from the men who had left her, a lot that she had left to give. And now it was Timmie's, with all of her heart. 'What if I adopt him?'

'I see.' The social worker sat down heavily in a chair and looked at Samantha. He didn't like what he was seeing. He could see that she loved the child. 'I don't know, Miss Taylor. I would hate to get your hopes up. His mother may still want him.'

A strange light came into Sam's eyes. 'By what right, I might ask, Mr. Pfizer? As I recall, she beat him, not to mention her drug habits—'

'All right, all right . . . I know.' Oh, Jesus. This he didn't need, not today—not any day, in fact. People only got hurt thinking the way she did. The truth was that his mother could most likely keep him, whether Sam liked that idea or not. 'The fact is she's the boy's natural mother. The courts lean over backward to respect that.'

'How far do they lean?' Her voice was both frightened and cold. It was frightening to have let herself love the child as much as she did now, and to have to face the possibility that he might leave.

The social worker looked at her sadly. 'To tell you the truth, they lean pretty far.'

'Couldn't I do something?'

'You could.' He sighed. 'You could hire a lawyer and fight her, if she still wants him. But you might lose . . . you probably will.' And then he thought to ask her about the child. 'What about the boy? Have you asked him? That could weigh with the court, even though he's still very young. A natural mother would have a strong case here, no matter how rotten she is. You know, the worst of it is

that.
 'Oh, no; It was a cry of anguish. I wouldn't let her come and beat me?'
 But he looked frightened when she looked down into his face again and she could feel him tremble. 'Would she step for him to take.
 being honest with him, she knew she had to. It was a big think it would be harder for everyone that way; She was 'I don't know. Maybe we could arrange that, but I 'Would she come to see me?'
 'I don't know, Timmie. That would be the hard part; 'What about my mum?'
 little kid in the whole world.
 again, the tears spilling from her eyes. 'You're the best
 Of course I want you, silly.' She hugged him tight.
 'You mean you want me?' He seemed astounded.
 ant! She was having to fight back the tears and he started that too. I would never do anything and he started to adopt you, if they'd let me. But you have to mean... I mean... It was like a proposal of marriage.
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 'You mean stay here with you?' His eyes grew huge in
 mean—

The next morning Sam called Martin Pfizer and told him what Timmie had said. She also told him some of the other things he had told her, about the beatings and the neglect, things he had kept inside for a long, sad time. Pfizer shook his head.

'I hate to say it, but it doesn't surprise me. All right, I'll see what I can do.'

But by the next day he knew that he could do nothing. He had spent two hours with the woman, tried to reason with her, had talked to her counsellor at the facility where she had been incarcerated, but he knew that it was useless to say more. With a heavy heart he called Sam that evening and found her alone in the big house.

'She won't do it, Miss Taylor. I tried everything, reason, threats, everything. She wants him.'

'Why? She doesn't love him.'

'She thinks she does. She spent hours telling me about her father and mother, how her father beat her, her mother whipped her. It's the only thing she knows.'

'But she'll kill him.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. But there isn't a damn thing we can do now until she tries.'

[illegible]

“Thank you,” Her voice was chilly when she hung up, and she spun around the room half a dozen times, numbing to herself and thinking, and it drove her nuts that she had to wait until morning before she could call. But when Timmie turned up the next morning, she gave him several errands to do for her, so that she could call Caroline’s old lawyer and see if he could refer her to someone who might take the case.

"But can I sue for custody?" Sam's hand trembled as she asked. "That doesn't mean that you have a chance. She's a natural mother, Miss Taylor. You're a single woman, and a— a handicapped person." He caught himself quickly. "But look what I've done for him already. Look at the life he could have here."

"I know. That makes sense to you and me, but there's an element of precedent involved, and you'll have to convince the judge. Get yourself a lawyer, Miss Taylor, and give it a try. But you have to be realistic. Treat it as a test case, an experiment. If you lose, if you win, you get the boy. Was he crazy? Didn't he understand that she loved Timmie and he loved her?"

"Thank you." Her voice was chilly when she hung up, and she spun around the room half a dozen times, listening to herself and thinking, and it drove her nuts. "Morning before she could call."

wanted to do, what Timmie wanted, what the social worker had said, and where Timmie's mother was. 'My, my, you do have a problem, don't you?' But he sounded intrigued by what she had told him. 'If you don't mind, I'd really like to come out and see the boy.' She had told him that both she and Timmie were bound to wheelchairs, but she had explained to him about the ranch and how well Timmie had done. 'I think an important part of your case would hinge on the surroundings, and I should see them if I'm to make any sense. That is, of course, if you decide that you'd like me to represent you.' But so far she had liked what he had said.

'How do you feel about the case, Mr. Warren?'

'Well, why don't we talk about it at greater length tomorrow? On the surface I'm not overly optimistic, but this could be one of those highly emotional situations that get resolved in a most unorthodox way.'

'In other words, I don't have a chance. Is that what you're saying?' Her heart sank.

'Not exactly. But it won't be easy. I think you know that already.'

She nodded. 'I suspected that much from what the social worker said. It doesn't make any sense to me though, dammit. If that woman is a junkie and a child abuser, why is she even considered a possibility as Timmie's custodial parent?'

'Because she's his natural mother.'

'Is that really enough?'

'No. But if he were you're son, wouldn't you want every chance to keep him, no matter how screwed up you were?'

Samantha sighed into the phone. 'What about the good of the child?'

'That's going to be our best argument, Miss Taylor. Now tell me where you are and I'll come and see you tomorrow. Route Twelve, you said? Let's see, how far is that from...'

She gave him the appropriate directions and he appeared the next day at noon. He was driving a dark

they were finished talking business.

With the others, she promised to come and get him when leftover stew. She promised to come and get him when

'Because I know you, silly, now go eat.' He had gone off laughing his bright little laugh.

'How did you know that was what I thought?' he didn't quite dare ask. 'And no, he is not a cop.' Timmie

'Business.' She grinned at him in answer to the question 'What about?'

'You'll meet him but I want to talk to him first.'

almost as though he were her son, and of course she did much like Samantha that somehow they regarded him masco, he was the youngest in the place and he looked so weren't in school. They all accepted Timmie as their

is she left him with Josh and the handful of kids who 'Why can't I meet him too?' He had pouted ferociously

re was expecting a grown-up for lunch at the house. moved when she had left him but she had explained that lunch there a few minutes before. He had been very had 'stolen' from the main hall when she took Timmie to witches and hot coffee, and there was a hot apple pie she led him to the big house, where she had prepared sandwich cowboy shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, and she instead of her usual flannel shirt, and her dark blue she had worn a soft lilac sweater with her jeans today

'So am I. Not that you can tell anymore.' Nonetheless 'Hell yes. How did you know?' Nonetheless

know. But he laughed right out loud.

'Forgive me, but are you from New York?' She had to

among people who looked so much like him. She held out a hand from her wheelchair with a grin.

when she saw him. She had worked for too many years Norman Warren. And Samantha couldn't resist a smile in his mid-forties. His watch was Piaget, his hair was good-looking cream-coloured shirt. He was a man clearly beige cashmere jacket, an expensive silk tie, and a very

And as she sat over her own lunch with Norman Warren, she told him everything she could about the child. 'May I see him?' he finally asked. When they went to find him at the main hall, Warren looked around himself with interest and eyed the dazzlingly beautiful woman in the lilac sweater, perfectly at ease in her chair. Just being there was an experience for Norman Warren, he could see from the way the place was kept, and from the happy people he saw around them, that what Samantha had done was a success. But nothing had prepared him for what he saw when he met Timmie, or when the boy mounted a palomino with Josh's help, or when he saw Sam ride beside him on Pretty Girl, or when the others came home from school and took their lessons. Norman Warren didn't leave until after dinner, and when he did, he did so with regret.

'I want to stay forever.'

'I'm sorry, I can't adopt you too.' Samantha laughed with him. 'And fortunately you don't qualify to come here as a student. But anytime you'd like to just come and visit and ride with us, we'd love it.'

He looked sheepish and almost whispered, 'I'm scared shitless of horses.'

She whispered back, 'We could cure you.'

Another sotto voce, 'No, you couldn't. I won't let you.' And then they both laughed and he drove off. They had come to terms on the agreement—she would pay him a fee of ten thousand dollars to represent her in her suit. She liked him very much, and he seemed to like Timmie, and there was every reason to hope that she at least had a chance to win him, and if she didn't, she could appeal it. He stressed once again that it wouldn't be easy, but it wasn't impossible either, and there were a lot of sympathetic factors in her favour, not least among them the way she and Timmie loved each other, and he hoped the fact that they were both in wheelchairs would add drama and sympathy to her side rather than...

Timmie's dream. There were children's boxes, things to wear, and games, and puzzles, a bright fire engine with a hat for him to wear, and a sweater for him. And in the main hall was a huge tree surrounded by teddy bear, and even some things Sam had made for him. presents. There were toys for all the children currently staying at the ranch. And one of the counselors, at her request, had dressed up as Santa, and it reminded Sam. The memory of the man she still so loved placing the angel and Josh of the year when Tate Jordan had been Santa. on the Christmas tree came back to her like a knife stab to her heart. Suddenly she was reminded of so many things

about Tate and about John, whom she so seldom thought of now. They had had another baby, she knew, and Liz had finally been fired by the network, because she was so tiresome on the air. John Taylor's career was still booming but once in a great while when Sam watched him she found him plastic and empty and too pretty and terribly boring, and she wondered why she had ever cared. It seemed amazing now to watch eleven years of one's life fly out the window and not even care, but she just didn't. It was different when she thought of Tate.

'Sam . . . can I ask you a crazy question?' Josh asked her as they stood apart in a corner, watching the kids open their gifts.

'Sure. What?' But she already knew.

'Were you in love with Tate Jordan?' She looked into Josh's eyes and nodded her head slowly.

'Yes, I was.'

'Was that why he left?'

'I suppose. He decided not to work things out, I guess. And I had told him I didn't want to play the same game as Caro and Bill. But he didn't think a lady should love a ranch hand. At least not openly.' She looked sad as she spoke. 'So he left.'

'I figured it was something like that.'

'And he had some kind of fit when he found out who my ex-husband was . . . thought he wasn't good enough for me, or something equally dumb . . .'

'Shit.' Josh looked instantly angry. 'He was worth ten of that jerk. Oh—' His face flushed bright red. 'I'm sorry, Sam . . .'

She chuckled. 'Don't be. I was just thinking the same thing.'

'And he never wrote you or nothing?'

'No. I think I must have looked for him on every ranch in this country, but I never found him.'

Josh looked sorry again as he glanced at Sam. 'It's a damn shame, Sam. He was a good man, and I always thought he loved you. Maybe he'll turn up someday, just to say hi to Bill or me or Caro, and find you here instead.'

It took them all two days to recover from the excitement close to home.

She didn't want to hear any more. He had come a little too midst of the kids. It was her way of telling him that she might attack you next time we're alone. And with that, 'Watch out, Josh,' she said, trying to glare at him. 'I'm a woman anymore at thirty-three.'

'No, but there's a lot wrong with pretending you're not him this time.'

'There's nothing wrong with iced tea.' She grinned at him, just act like a happy little old lady and give him iced tea.

no, you just act like a happy little old lady and give him Angeles talking to you the other day. He likes you, like a Sam . . . damn it, it's true. I saw that lawyer from Los Angeles said nothing and kept her eyes on the kids. 'It's true, hear you think of yourself as one.' He had hit a nerve but have to live or think or act like cripples, and then in your spend all your time teaching these kids that they don't have to live or think or act like cripples, and then in your his voice. 'The truth is, Sam, you're a damn liar. You an old maid.' And then he narrowed his eyes and lowered someone else, you're too damn young to treat yourself like know, about Tate. And it don't matter if it's Tate or his face grew serious. 'You're talking bullshit though, you 'Sweet-talker, but I love it.' He grinned at her, and then 'On you it looks good.'

'All sounds the same to me. Try fifty-nine and see thirty-three.'

She grinned at the old man. 'Josh, I love you. 'At your age, Sam? Don't be crazy. What are you twenty-eight, twenty-nine?' 'I've got the kids instead.' 'It doesn't matter, Josh. I would. That's all over me. You think he'd care?' 'You think he'd care?' 'I've got the kids instead.' 'It doesn't matter, Josh. I would. That's all over me. You think he'd care?' 'You think he'd care?' 'I've got the kids instead.'

Sam shook her head with a taut expression on her face. 'I hope not. He'd be in for one hell of a shock.' She meant legs, but this time Josh shook his head.

of Christmas. There weren't even any riding lessons, just some casual groups that rode out over the hills, but neither Timmie nor Sam were among them. They were both spending a lot of time alone, as though they each had a deep need to be together. The hearing was set for December 28.

'You scared?' The night before the hearing, she had put Timmie in her smallest guest room, next door to her own room, and she was just tucking him into bed.

'About tomorrow?' Her face was close to his, and she touched it with one long graceful hand. 'A little. Are you?'

'Yeah.' She saw now that the big blue eyes were filled with terror. 'A lot. What if she hits me?'

'I won't let her.'

'What if she takes me?'

'She won't.' But what if they let her take him? That was the ghost that haunted Samantha, and she couldn't promise him that that wouldn't happen. She didn't want to lie. She had already told him that if they lost it she would appeal it, if that was what he wanted, and she had also told him that if what he wanted was to be with his mummy then that was okay too. It tore at her heart to give him that option, but she knew she had to. She didn't want to steal him from his own mother. She wanted him to come to her with an open heart. 'It'll be all right, sweetheart. You'll see.'

But she didn't look nearly as certain the next day as Josh pushed both their wheelchairs up the ramp at the Los Angeles County Courthouse. She and Timmie were ferociously holding hands, and when they pressed into the elevator in their wheelchairs, they both felt awkward and conspicuous until Josh helped pull them out. Norman Warren was waiting for them just outside the courtroom, in a dark blue suit. He looked eminently respectable, as did Sam. She had worn a pretty pale blue wool dress, which was a remnant of her New York wardrobe, a matching light blue mohair coat, and plain black leather Gucci shoes. She had bought Timmie new clothes especially for the occasion, little navy blue slacks with a

[illegible]

icapped adopting mother, but they had to keep in mind, all of them there, that what was being looked for by the court, and should remain everyone's goal, was the ultimate good of the child. The judge offered the option to have the child removed, but Sam and Timmie had already discussed it. He said he wanted to be there, he didn't want to be 'taken away by the cops.' She assured him that he could wait outside with Josh, but he insisted that he wanted to be with her. She noticed then that he never let his eyes roam toward his mother, as though he were frightened to acknowledge her presence, or even see her, and he kept his hand in Sam's and his eyes toward the judge.

The opposing attorney called Timmie's mother as his first witness, and as Sam sat staring her full in the face, she realised full well what she was up against. A sweet face, a soft voice, a sob story from beginning to end, and the assurance that this time she had learned a lesson and had done nothing but read psychology books to learn more about herself and how she might help her precious son. Timmie's eyes fell into his lap the whole time her testimony was being heard and he didn't raise them again until she'd left the stand. Sam's attorney put on record that he would cross-examine her later, and the next witnesses were called, a psychiatrist who had examined Timmie's mother for the county, declaring her to be a warm, feeling young woman who had had an unfortunate youth. They felt that she had no intention of hurting her child, but had been under enormous pressure financially, but that now she was about to go to work in a big hotel downtown everything was looking up. Norman Warren made the psychiatrist look foolish, and the implication was made that she would have ample opportunity in the hotel to start picking up johns. The comment was stricken from the record, Norman was admonished, and the witness was excused from the stand. There were additionally two counsellors called, and then a doctor attesting to the mother's health and to the fact that she was in no way addicted to drugs anymore. And last of all, there was a

'But,' her attorney insisted as he objected, 'the court must keep in mind that this woman is no longer addicted, that she has just been through a very arduous state-run drug programme, and if we are to say that this woman is not rehabilitated, then we are in fact saying that our entire

and three as an adult. programmes, had been arrested nine times as a juvenile, had had five abortions to date, had been in seven drug tion at fifteen, gotten pregnant with Timmie at sixteen, twelve, heroin at thirteen, had been arrested for prostitution at fifteen, gotten pregnant with Timmie at sixteen, nevertheless made clear that she had discovered drugs at in the piece. But despite what she looked like it was admittedly difficult to envision this frail child as the villain before she started talking, she started crying. And it was on the stand. The girl was shaking in her seat, and almost him a kiss and turned back to watch what was happening but he wasn't given any choice by Samantha, who blew Timmie out of the room, protesting in a hoarse whisper, mother, and at a sign from Sam, Josh had firmly wheeled done to them even came close to what he did to Timmie's tion with the woman herself. But none of what he had though their testimony itself was tainted due to associa- them almost with an air of amusement and derision, as all the others look slightly shady, and he interrogated better off not touching that one.' Nonetheless he had made going to do to impeach what the man is saying? We're 'The judge is Catholic, my dear. Besides, what am I 'Why not?'

tackling the Catholic Church on the stand.

but he explained to Sam that he had no intention of to call Timmie's mother to the stand after the lunch break, all except the mother herself and the priest. He was going adjourned for lunch. Norman had cross-examined them proceeding, and when the priest left the stand, they gut. She held tightly to Timmie's hand through the entire him, and as he said it Sam felt her stomach flip over in her certain that the child belonged with the mother who loved had baptised Timmie. He said that he felt absolutely priest who had known her since she was eleven, in fact he

priest who had known her since she was eleven, in certain that the child belonged with the mother who had baptised Timmie. He said that he felt about him, and as he said it Sam felt her stomach flip over. She held tightly to Timmie's hand through the proceedings, and when the priest left the stand adjourned for lunch. Norman had cross-examined all except the mother herself and the priest. He was to call Timmie's mother to the stand after the lunch but he explained to Sam that he had no intention of tackling the Catholic Church on the stand.

'Why not?'

'The judge is Catholic, my dear. Besides, what going to do to impeach what the man is saying?'

better off not touching that one.' Nonetheless he had all the others look slightly shady, and he interrogated them almost with an air of amusement and derision though their testimony itself was tainted due to association with the woman herself. But none of what he done to them even came close to what he did to Timmie, and at a sign from Sam, Josh had firmly wheeled Timmie out of the room, protesting in a hoarse whisper but he wasn't given any choice by Samantha, who gave him a kiss and turned back to watch what was happening on the stand. The girl was shaking in her seat, and all before she started talking, she started crying. And it was admittedly difficult to envision this frail child as the villain in the piece. But despite what she looked like it nevertheless made clear that she had discovered drug twelve, heroin at thirteen, had been arrested for prostitution at fifteen, gotten pregnant with Timmie at sixteen, had had five abortions to date, had been in seven drug programmes, had been arrested nine times as a juvenile and three as an adult.

'But,' her attorney insisted as he objected, 'the court must keep in mind that this woman is no longer addicted that she has just been through a very arduous state-trial drug programme, and if we are to say that this woman is not rehabilitated, then we are in fact saying that our entire

system of rehabilitation does not work.' The objection was duly noted and sustained. Her arrest record was stricken from the record as per Californian law, the rest stayed.

Her testimony took well over an hour, she sobbed throughout and talked remorsefully about 'my baby' whenever she had the chance, but every time Sam looked at her, she thought of the shots she hadn't got for him, which was why he had contracted polio, she thought of the beatings he had had at her hands, the torment, the loneliness, the terror, and all Sam wanted was to rise out of her wheelchair and scream.

For their side, Norman Warren called the social worker, Martin Pfizer, who was unemotional, matter-of-fact, and not particularly exciting as a witness; there was Sam's own physician; Josh; and there had been a packet of letters from important people, like judges and doctors, about the marvellous work she was doing on the ranch. And then at last there was Sam herself. The fact that she was divorced was brought out, that she was not remarried and had no 'prospects,' as the opposing attorney put it, at the present time, the fact that she was indeed irreversibly handicapped. The whole sad, long list was emphasised over and over until Sam almost started to feel sorry for herself. Norman objected and got that line of questioning stopped. In the end she wound up sounding like a kindly, interested do-gooder who wanted to help Timmie, but unlike his half-hysterical mother she did not shout 'my baby' and have to be led from the room.

The final witness was the hardest. It was Timmie himself, and his mother was asked if she could possibly quell her tears, or if she would like a recess during which she might compose herself once again. She chose to subdue herself there and then, still sniffing loudly as she listened while Sam watched the look of terror in the child's face. Everything that had previously been brought out was now tested. What his life was like with his mother, what his life was like with Sam, how his mother provided for him, what Sam bought him and gave him, how he felt about the two women, and then suddenly, 'Are you afraid

of your mother, Timmie? But the question itself obviously frightened him so much that he shrank back in his wheelchair, holding his teddy, shaking his head violently.

'No . . . no!'

'Does she ever beat you or hit you?'

There was no answer and then he shook his head and 'No,' Sam closed her eyes in despair. She understood what he was doing. There was no way he could tell the truth with his mother there. The judge kindly asked and then they were all sent home. He said that he had them to return the following morning. He said that he had all of their phone numbers, and that if, for some reason, he felt that he would not be able to reach a verdict quickly, he would let them know. But if they did not hear from him that evening, they were to return to the same court the next morning, bringing Timmie—this was a glance at Sam—and the verdict would be returned. He felt that in the interest of the child, and to avoid any additional pain to all parties, it was best to have the verdict returned right away. With that, the judge rose and the bailiff announced that court was adjourned.

On the drive back to the ranch Sam felt her whole body ache with exhaustion and Timmie fell asleep in her arms almost as soon as they left the kerb. He had trembled with terror as his mother had begun to approach him, clutched at Sam's hand, and Norman had whisked him from the courtroom as Josh helped Samantha, and they got away as quickly as they could. She realised later as she held him what a brave thing Timmie had done by being willing to try to go through the custody hearings. If his mother won him back, she might do anything to get even, and he had as she held him close. How on earth was she going to give him to that woman if she had to? How could she bear to take him and running away somewhere. But where would she lay in bed that night she knew she couldn't, that As she lay in bed that night she knew she couldn't, that taking him and running away somewhere. But where would she lay in bed that night she knew she couldn't, that how, and what was the point really? Two people

the secret cabin, which she hadn't visited since she got back to the ranch. But she knew that even there they would find her. It was hopeless. All they could do was believe in justice and hope for the best.

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Sam was awake long before sunrise the next morning. In fact, she realised as she looked at the clock, she had only slept for an hour and a half. But when she wheeled her way into Timmie's room, beside hers, she found that he was awake too.

'Hi, sweetheart . . .' She kissed him on the tip of the nose and reached for his braces. 'Good morning.'

'I won't go with her.'

'Why don't we worry about that after breakfast?' Sam tried to sound lighthearted, but he burst into tears and clung to her. Thus had begun the day. They had eaten breakfast alone again that morning. The rest of the children had no idea what was going on, and only a few of the therapists and counsellors had been told by Samantha. They were all trying to keep it as low-key as they could. But it was obvious when she left again with Josh and Timmie that something major was going on. As though they sensed something wrong around them, the children were unusually quiet as they boarded the bus to go to school.

In Los Angeles Samantha and Josh and Timmie met Norman outside the courtroom, and they all looked grim.

'Take it easy, Sam.' Norm gently touched her arm. She was wearing grey slacks and a grey cashmere sweater, and Timmie was wearing the same suit as the day before, this time with a red and white plaid shirt.

The judge began the proceedings by asking to have Timmie in the room, and then addressed himself to the boy, explaining that he had listened to all the evidence and had tried to make a good decision that would make Timmie happy for a very long time. He smiled at him like a benevolent grandfather and then asked him if he could wheel himself to the front of the room, explaining that it was only a formality, because he was the most important person there, after all, and all of this was about him. Timmie looked questioningly at Sam and then she smiled and nodded, and he rolled himself front and centre as the judge had asked.

With that, the judge turned his attention to Sam, explaining that he understood that what she was doing was not only admirable, but saintly, that he had talked to several people about the ranch, and that he was impressed beyond anything he could describe to her. Once again he favoured her with a warm smile. But then he went on to say that although there was no doubt that her intentions were excellent, and that she could certainly materially provide better for Timmie than could his mother, and although Timmie certainly had a difficult life with this young woman who had tried so hard to find the right road for herself and her handicapped child, he did however feel certain now, particularly after talking to Father Kenney, that Timmie's mother had found her feet at last. Therefore, he beamed down at Timmie, he had found that Timmie belonged with his rightful mother. 'And now'—he gestured to the startled young girl in the pink blouse and with the tousled hair—'you may reclaim your son.' And then with an official bang of his gavel that felt like Sam's heart hitting bottom as she stared, he announced in a booming voice, 'The court finds in favour of the natural mother.' He got up then and left the room as Sam tried desperately not to scream. Timmie's mother, however, did not restrain herself in a similar fashion, and ran to him, almost knocking him out of his chair. All Sam could see was Timmie flailing wildly, trying to move away from her, and his chair being firmly held by the lawyer as he was

embraced by his mother shrieking loudly all the while, 'My baby . . . my baby . . .'

'Sam . . . Sam!' It was a plaintive wail that almost tore her asunder and instinctively she turned toward him and tried to push her wheelchair past Josh and Norman to reach the child. But Josh grabbed the handles on the back of the wheelchair and Norm blocked her, the two men had instantly understood each other without a word. It would do no good now. The mother was all over her child.

'Stop . . .' Sam pushed at Norm. 'I have to see him.'

'You can't, Sam!' He spoke quietly but firmly, and Josh wouldn't let go of the chair as she pushed.

'I have to, dammit . . . Josh, let go!' She was beginning to sob now, but already Timmie's mother's lawyer was pushing his little wheelchair from the room as in anguish Timmie turned back toward Samantha, waving his little arms with a grief-stricken face.

'Sam . . . Sam!'

'I love you!' she called out. 'I love you, Timmie! It's okay!' And then he was gone. And as though the last ounce of strength had left her, she dropped her face in her hands and began to sob. For a long moment neither man knew what to do, and then Norman knelt beside her.

'I'm so sorry, Sam . . . we can appeal it.'

'No.' She could barely speak as she reached for her handkerchief and shook her head at Norm. 'No. I can't do that to him.' He nodded and stood up and then signalled Josh. There was no reason to stay there. It was all over for Samantha and Timmie. The boy was gone.

she were dead, but some faint, irrational hope that one day she might get Timmie back kept her from doing anything truly crazy. Instead, she just lay in bed, without moving, without eating, only dragging herself to the bathroom, for two whole days. She just cried and slept and then cried some more when she awoke, and at the end of the second day she awoke to hear someone pounding on her door. She lay silently in bed, fully intending not to answer, and then she heard glass breaking and knew that someone had just come through her front door.

'Who is it?' She sounded frightened. Maybe it was a burglar, she wondered. But as she sat up in bed with a look of confusion and terror, the lights in the hall suddenly went on, and she saw Jeff with his shock of red hair. His arm was bleeding as he stood there and then he looked suddenly embarrassed, and as always he flushed beet-red. 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to see you. I couldn't take it anymore, Sam. I haven't seen a light on in here for two days, and you didn't answer the other times when I came to the door . . . I thought maybe . . . I was afraid . . . I wanted to know if you were all right.' She nodded, smiling at him for caring, and then the tears came again and suddenly he was holding her tightly in his arms. The odd thing was that as he held her it was a familiar feeling, as though he had held her before, as though she knew his arms and his chest and his body, but she knew that this was a crazy thought and she pulled away from him and blew her nose.

'Thanks, Jeff.'

He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at her. Even after two days of just lying there, she looked lovely. And for just an instant he had a wild urge to kiss her, and as he thought of it he flushed bright red again. But as he did she was suddenly laughing through her tears and he looked at her in confusion. 'What are you laughing at?'

'When you get embarrassed, you look just like a radish.'

'Thanks a lot.' He grinned. 'I've been called carrot-top, but never radish-face.' And then with a gentle smile, 'You okay, Sam?'

'Yeah,'
 'Josh's girl?' She looked amused and he grinned at her.
 'Mary Jo.' This time he turned fire-engine red.
 'Are you taking a date?'
 'I forgot to tell you about that one,'

in the West.
 'No, but you seem to have worked on every damn ranch
 you I used to work there?'

'Yeah. I'm going over to the Bar Three. Did I ever tell
 ago. 'Oh, shit. So it is. And you're going out partying?'
 the verdict on the twenty-ninth, that had been two days
 backward. . . . the hearing had been on the twenty-eighth,
 'Is it?' She looked surprised and then counted
 'It's New Year's Eve, Sam.'

that it was after hours.
 and Jeff knew it, but she knew from the darkness outside
 the two? She didn't like the men to drink around the kids
 'No.' She laughed at him. 'I mean how come you drank
 'It just does. I usually don't get tight till five or six.'

'How come?'
 his head. 'I just drank two beers. It takes more than that.'

'You drunk, Jeff?'
 He looked embarrassed and blushed again but he shook
 redhead.
 on his breath. She frowned as she looked at the young
 'The judge sucks.' She suddenly laughed at the out-
 'Well, that's what the judge decided.'

'The hell they do.' He almost snarled.
 'Didn't you know?'
 and drug addicts make better mothers than cripples, or
 'I'm single, but I'm a cripple. That's enough. Prostitutes
 cripple and I'm single. They probably don't even care if
 e doesn't have a chance of winning. The fact is that I'm
 'Yeah?' She looked cynical and angry. 'He's full of shit.'

Josh says your lawyer wants to appeal it, all the way to
 Supreme Court.
 'But I will be, I guess.' And then another trickle of
 s coursed down her face. 'I just hope Timmie'll be

'What did Josh have to say to that?'

'That he'd kick my ass if I got her drunk. But hell, she's almost nineteen. She's legal.'

'I'd watch out though, if I were you. If Josh said he'd kick your ass, he means it.' And then her face grew sober again. 'How is he?'

'Worried about you.' Jeff's voice was gentle in the quiet room. 'We all are, the ones who know. Your lawyer was here yesterday.'

'I figured he would be. To pick up Timmie's things?' Jeff hesitated and then nodded. 'Did he get all his Christmas stuff?' She began to cry again. 'I want him to have all of it.'

'He has it, Sam.' And then, not knowing what else to do for her, he took her in his arms and held her, and she lay her head against him and cried. He wanted to tell her then that he loved her, but he was afraid to. He had loved her the first time he saw her, with that incredible pale gold hair. But she was nine years older than he was and she never acted like she was interested in any man. He wondered sometimes if she could still do it, but he didn't even care, he just wanted to hold her and tell her he loved her one day. They lay like that for a long time, and then the tears stopped.

'Thank you.' She looked at him for a long, quiet time, stirred by his strength and his youthful beauty. 'You'd better get out of here now or you'll end up spending New Year's Eve with me instead of May Jo.'

'You know something?' His voice was deep and sexy. 'I'd like that.'

'You would, would you?' Her eyes were teasing but she could see that his were not. But she didn't think what she was suddenly feeling was what Jeff needed. He didn't need an older woman, and a cripple yet, on his hands. He was young. He had his whole life in front of him, filled with girls like Mary Jo. But she was suddenly so desperately lonely that she wanted to reach out to him, and before she did something foolish, she wanted him to go. 'Okay, kiddo, go celebrate New Year's Eve in style.' She sat up in her bed and tried to smile.

doorway, and then she heard his cowboy boots echo in the hallway and then the front door close.

She looked up into the brilliant green eyes and shook her head. 'No, babe, it's okay. You go.' He nodded slowly then and stood looking at her for one last moment in the doorway, and then she heard his cowboy boots echo in the hallway and then the front door close.

'I'll stay if you want me to, Sam,' she head, and then stood up and looked down at her. 'too much.' He held her once again then, kissed the top of her head, and then stood up and looked down at her. 'I need you to change that. I just . . . I couldn't take it . . . I need you again, but especially you and Josh. Don't do anything Please don't spoil it.' And then, with tears in her eyes again, 'I need you right now. You and Josh, and the nights like this. I want us to be friends for a long time, Jeff. It's New Year's Eve, people say things they shouldn't on She put a finger to his lips. 'I don't want you to tell me. You're crazy. Do you know how long I've wanted you?' like this;

'behind me now and yours isn't. You don't need something No, nothing like that, love. It's just that my life is ing?' He bridled like a young stallion and she smiled. 'You don't believe in ranchers and ranch hands mix- I won't let you.'

'Why not?' 'I don't want to leave you, Sam. I want to stay here,' gently as she let it go. 'You can't stay, Jeff.'

But she shook her head as she looked at him, took his hand, held it to her cheek, and then kissed the fingertips 'I don't want to leave you, Sam. I want to stay here,' gently as she let it go. 'You can't stay, Jeff.'

'Go on, Jeff.' She looked worried. 'It's time for you to Does it? It sure makes you beautiful too.'

'I'm tough, I guess, Jeff. Time does that to you.' Time, and come back to bed. I guess maybe tomorrow I'm going to take a hot bath, make myself something to and you, Sam?' 'I'm glad to hear it. For a while there you had me

'Sam? . . . Sam?' It was six o'clock in the morning on New Year's Day and she was dressed and in her kitchen, making coffee for the first time in three days, when she heard Josh pounding on the door. She smiled to herself. One by one they would all break her door down if she didn't come out now. She still felt the terrible emptiness of Timmie's loss, but she knew that she couldn't let herself go. She owed more than that to the other kids. Slowly she wheeled her chair to the front door and opened it, looking out into the grey light before dawn as Josh stood in his heavy jacket on the front porch.

'Hi, Josh. Happy New Year.'

He stood there, saying nothing, and she wondered what was wrong. He looked as though he had been crying. 'You okay?' He shook his head and walked slowly into the room. 'Come and sit down.' She had thought that he had come to offer her solace and now she knew that he was in trouble. 'What is it?' She eyed him, her own brow furrowed with worry, and he gazed at her as he fell heavily into a chair and then dropped his head into his hands.

'The kids, Jeff and Mary Jo. They went out to some party last night'—he stopped and swallowed hard—'and they got drunk as skunks, and then drove home.' Sam felt her heart begin to race. She was afraid to ask the next question but he answered it for her. He looked up with an air of great pain and she saw two great big tears creep down his face. 'They ran into a tree and bounced off into a ravine . . . Mary Jo broke both her arms and legs, and tore up her face pretty bad . . . Jeff's dead.' Sam closed her eyes and reached for his hand, thinking of the boy who had held her only the night before and wondering if she had asked him to stay with her after all, that none of it

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turned to Sam. 'What happened?' Josh looked at the broken window in surprise then and turned her wheelchair slowly out the door.

her own jacket on a low peg near the front door, and arms. She forced the memories from her mind, reached for and he had loved the ranch. It was mad to be talking of burying that boy though, only a few hours before he had been sitting on a corner of her bed, holding her in his arms. 'We can bury him here.' He was one of her people now, 'Bury him with Bill and Miss Caro, I guess, or in town, like that, Josh?' This was a new problem for her.

'I just hope we find something in his things that tells us folks are somewhere else, they may want him sent back,' Josh sighed and stood up. 'I told them what to do. If his the hospital, and we'd call and tell them what to keep him at Sam closed her eyes again and took a deep breath. 'We'd better to through his stuff. Where is he now?' 'I just hope we find something in his things that tells us folks are somewhere else, they may want him sent back,' Josh sighed and stood up. 'I told them what to do. If his the hospital, and we'd call and tell them what to keep him at Sam closed her eyes again and took a deep breath.

and you, and how happy he was around the kids and it never talked about his life much, just about the kids here but I don't know if he has sisters or brothers or a dad. He dead, because he said something about it once or twice we should go through his things. I know his mum was from his pocket and then replaced it with a sigh. 'I guess I don't know.' He blew his nose on a red handkerchief. 'Does he have folks we should call?' 'I don't know. I know his mum was from his pocket and then replaced it with a sigh. 'I guess I don't know.' He blew his nose on a red handkerchief.

still wanting him to come back. understood the references he'd had from other ranchers, for a year but it felt like half a lifetime, and now she 'But I loved that boy too.' He had only been with them, 'Okay, Josh?' He nodded and then sobbed into Sam's arms. and then she reached out and held him. 'Will Mary Jo be dead?' 'Oh, God . . . ' She opened her eyes and looked at Josh, 'But I loved that boy too.' He had only been with them, 'Okay, Josh?' He nodded and then sobbed into Sam's arms. and then she reached out and held him. 'Will Mary Jo be dead?' 'Oh, God . . . ' She opened her eyes and looked at Josh,

would ever have happened. But it would have been wrong for her to seduce a boy of twenty-four, she told herself as she thought back over the night before. Wrong? she questioned herself. Wrong? Was it better for him to be

Jeff. He wanted to be sure I was okay last night. He came to see me before they went out.'

'I had a feeling he'd do that, Sam. He looked at this house for two days and I knew all he could think about was you.' Sam nodded and said nothing more until they reached his cabin. For her it was bumpy going, because the paths to the men's cabins didn't need the smoothly paved walks that were everywhere else to allow for the wheelchairs. But Josh pushed her over the bumps and ruts and eased her wheelchair into the comfortable little cabin. She looked around at the unmade bed and moderate chaos that the boy had left, and felt that if they looked hard enough, they would find him. Maybe he would come staggering out of the bathroom with a grin, or poke his head out of the covers, or come wandering in singing a song . . . He couldn't be dead . . . not Jeff . . . not that young boy. Josh looked at her with his own look of pain and sat down at the small maple desk and began to pull out papers. There were photographs and letters from friends, souvenirs from old jobs, pictures of girls, programs from rodeos, and everything except what they needed to find now.

Finally Josh came up with something that looked like a little leather billfold and in it he found a card with Jeff's social security number on it, some insurance papers, a couple of lottery tickets, and a slip of paper. On the paper it said, 'In case I get hurt, please contact my father, Don Jordan, Grady Ranch,' and there was a phone number in Montana.

As Josh looked at it his mouth dropped open and he stared, and then suddenly he remembered. Three . . . why hadn't he thought to ask her? Three . . . why hadn't he thought to ask her? He looked up at her and she frowned at him.

'What is it?'

There was nothing he could say so he handed her the slip of paper and walked away with a breath of air.

they were staying or how to reach them, and it meant that some of the other hands. No one seemed to know where was in Wyoming for the week, at a cattle auction with 'Okay.' But when Josh called, they told him that Tate to;

'Maybe you should.' She looked at him sadly. 'But I'm not going to want to talk to him. Not now.' It had been almost exactly three years since he'd run off.

'No, if it were anyone else, I'd do it, Josh. But I don't want to talk to him. Not now.' It had been almost exactly three years since he'd run off.

'You scared?'
'No, you are. You're the foreman.'

'You gonna do it?'
She nodded somberly. 'We have to. It's only right.'

going to do, Sam? You going to call him? He knew the sun rose slowly in the morning sky. 'What are you into her jacket pocket and wheeled outside.

Josh was waiting for her there, leaning against a tree, as asking and calling, there it was finally, his address, lying all the searching she had done, and all the looking and what to tell Tate Jordan and how. It was ironic that after changing fate. And now she had to face the problem of have died then too. Whatever had happened, there was no had to call his father. But she knew that even if they had love to Tate's son the night before—what an insane quirk trying to decide what to do and feeling her heart pound in Sam stared at the piece of paper for almost half an hour,

Jeff was going to have to be buried, either at the ranch or in town. They couldn't wait a week.

The funeral was simple and painful for all. But it was part of nature, part of life, Sam told the children, and Jeff had been their friend, so it was right that they should bury him together. The local minister said a little piece over the casket, and that day the men buried him next to Caro and Bill, and the children rode out over the hills, each of them carrying a bunch of flowers, which they left on the fresh grave. And afterward they all stood around and sang their favourite songs. It seemed a fitting way to bury someone who had been one of them and had been a friend to many. And as they turned their horses back toward the ranch and cantered over the hills, Samantha watched them, with the sun setting to their right, and their horses' hooves beating softly on the ground, and the air cool around them, and she thought that she had never seen anything as lovely in her life. For a moment she felt as though Jeff were riding alongside them, and in silent tribute to their lost friend, the ranch hands had led out Jeff's horse riderless, with his colourful Western saddle. For some reason it brought back her own memories of Timmie, and once more she felt tears sting her eyes.

And as she wrote to Tate that night from her desk at the big house, it helped her to hold out a hand to him, whatever had passed between them and whatever was no more. She too, had lost a child now, though he had been hers differently than Jeff had been Tate's, but still she knew the agony of that loss and she felt it again now even more deeply as she wrote to the man she had sought in vain for so long. She found herself wishing, too, that she knew what Jeff had told him. The one thing she didn't want him to know was what had happened to her. But she decided to twist the truth a little and pray that Jeff had not told at all.

'Three years doesn't seem like a very long time,' she wrote from her kitchen table after the initial paragraph in which she told him the news as simply as she could. 'But what a great deal has changed here. Caroline and Bill are

th gone now, resting next to where we laid Jeff today, in the hills, near their cabin. And the children who share the ranch with me rode out with horse in the sunset. It was a wonderful young man and a dear friend to us all, and the waste of such a young life is a source of disbelief and sorrow and immeasurable pain. I can't help but feel though that he accomplished more years, which we spend so much less well.

'I don't know if you were aware, but Caroline had left the ranch, after her death, for a special purpose. She wished it to be made into a special facility for handicapped children, and Josh and I worked for months afterward to get it ready. It was just before we opened our doors to these special children that Jeff touched the heart. He did for this kind of work take hours to relate but that should make you proud of him, and I will see now if in the slew of photographs we took in the beginning there are any of Jeff, which I will send you. It will undoubtedly give you a clearer idea of what he did here. The ranch is very different from what you once knew.

'Certainly none of us had realised that this was Caroline's intention for the ranch, but it has served a worthy purpose, as has your son. I grieve for you in your loss, I wish you well, and we will be sending you all of his things to avoid the need of your making this painful journey. If there is anything that we can do here in this regard, please don't hesitate to contact us. Josh is always here and I'm sure would be happy to help you.' She signed it, 'Cordially, Samantha Taylor.'

There was no trace in her letter of what had passed between them, and the day after the funeral, Sam had Josh and some of his boys pack up Jeff's things and ship

them air express to Tate. And that night she herself went through the ranch albums as promised and carefully took out each of the photographs of Jeff, searched for the corresponding negatives and the next day went into town with the whole stack. When the pictures came back a week later, she carefully went over them again to make sure that there were none of her, and there weren't, and then she put them in an envelope, without anything else, and mailed them to Tate. For Sam, that ended the chapter of Tate Jordan. She had found him at last. She had had the choice of reaching out to him, of telling him she still loved him, of even asking him to come. But just as she had sent Jeff away that fateful night, because she knew it would be selfish of her to reach out and wrong for the boy, now she turned away again, for her own reasons, and she congratulated herself afterward for what she had done. She didn't belong in Tate's life anymore, not the way she was. And she wondered as she lay in bed that night if she hadn't been crippled if she would have reached out to Tate now. There was no way to know, of course, because if she hadn't been crippled, she wouldn't have had the ranch, wouldn't have known Jeff, wouldn't have . . . She drifted off to sleep and was only awakened the next morning by the phone.

'Sam?' It was Norman Warren and he sounded excited at the other end.

'Hi.' She was still half asleep. 'What's up?' And then she realised that he probably still wanted to discuss the appeal. With Jeff's funeral and the difficult letter to write to Tate, she hadn't got back to him after their last conversation, but she had definitely decided that she didn't want to put Timmie through the ordeal. She had spoken to the social worker twice, he had told her that Timmie was having a rough time readjusting and he wanted to come back to her, but that there was nothing anyone could do, and he had told Timmie as much the last time he'd stopped by at their home. She had asked him if his mother was being decent to him this time, but the social worker was vague and said that he assumed she was.

'Sam, I want you to come to L.A.'
 'I don't want to discuss it, Norman.' She sat up in bed
 with an unhappy frown. 'There's no point. I won't do it.'
 'I understand that. But there are some other matters we
 have to work out.'
 'Like what?' She sounded suspicious.
 'Send them to me.'
 'There are some papers you didn't sign.'
 'I can't.'
 'Then bring them to me.' She sounded annoyed. 'I
 was tired and it was early. And then she realised, as
 blinked again, that it was Sunday. 'What are you do-
 ing on a Sunday, Norman?'
 'I just didn't have time to get to it last week. Look, I
 know this is an imposition, Sam, and you're busy too, but
 couldn't you please do me a favour? Could you come in
 today?'
 'On Sunday? Why?'
 'Please. Just do it for me. I'd be very grateful.'
 And then suddenly she panicked. 'Is something wrong
 with Timmie? Is he hurt? Did she beat him again?' Sam
 felt her heart race but he was quick to reassure her.
 'No, no, nothing like that. I'm sure he's fine. I'd just
 appreciate winding it all up today once and for all.'
 'Norman,' she sighed and looked at the clock. It was
 seven in the morning. 'Personally I think you're de-
 mented. But you were a big help, and you tried, so I'll do
 you a favour, just this once. Do you realise what a long
 drive that is for us?'
 'Will you bring Josh?'
 'Probably. Where shall we meet you? At your office?'
 'Just some papers that say you don't want to appeal.'
 'What could he be up to? Why the hell can't you mail
 them?'
 'I'm too cheap to buy a stamp.'
 She laughed at him. 'You're crazy.'
 'I know. What time will you be here?'
 'I don't know.' She yawned. 'How about after lunch?'

'Why not get it over with early?'
'You want me to come in my nightgown, Norman?'
'That would be nice. Shall we say eleven o'clock?'
'Oh, shit,' she sighed. 'All right. But it better not take too long. I have a lot of things to do here.'
'Fine.'

She called up Josh then and told him and he sounded as annoyed as she had. 'Why the hell can't he mail you the stuff?'

'I don't know. But if we have to do it, we might as well go in on a Sunday. I don't have time all week. I'm going to be too busy with the kids.' She was expecting eleven of them from different states.

'All right. Want to leave in half an hour?'

'Make it an hour.'

He did, and she swung herself into the car, wearing jeans and a red sweater, there was a red ribbon in her hair and she was wearing her favourite red cowboy boots.

'You look like a valentine, Sam.'

'I feel more like Halloween. I don't know why the hell we have to go to L.A. on a Sunday morning.' And when they reached Norman's house, he seemed terribly hyper and revved up and insisted they had to go to the courthouse, because he didn't have all the papers he needed there after all.

'On Sunday? Norman, have you been drinking?' She really was not amused.

'Just trust me, for God's sake.'

'If I didn't, I wouldn't be here.' Josh looked at him suspiciously and drove the car to the courthouse on the other side of town from where Norman lived. But when they got there, Norman suddenly looked as though he knew what he was doing. He flashed a pass at the guard downstairs, the guard nodded and let them in. 'Seventh floor,' he told the lone elevator man on duty, and when they got out of the elevator on the seventh floor, they turned left and then right and then left again and then suddenly they were in a brightly lit room with a uniformed matron at a desk and a policeman chatting to her

'You've got your son.' It had been two weeks since child in the wheelchair, holding Samantha's hand. basis. He's yours, Sam! He turned and looked at the small business of becoming a ward of the court on an interim occurred. Timmie won't have to go through all the 'Yes, he can reverse his decision based on what has just 'Right now?' Norman nodded. 'Can he do that?' all over. There were tears in Norman's eyes.

here this morning with Timmie's file. Sam, it's going to be lated for her, —and he called me. He said he'd meet us if they should put him in juvie—juvenile hall, he trans-judge last night about Timmie, because they weren't sure the woman who had become his friend. They called at apartment. And then he took a deep breath and smiled at Timmie's hand. 'No, she was somewhere else. Timmie was alone at the 'Was she there?' Her eyes were wide as she held Timmie alone at the house last night.

'She OD'ed, Sam, two days ago. The police found Sam's arm gently. 'What happened?' She looked horrified, as much by and another bruise on his neck. 'What happened?' She looked horrified, as much by then Sam saw that there were deep circles under his eyes as though he didn't understand what they meant. And 'My mum's dead.' He stared at Sam and said the words as long as she could, for as long as they would let her. 'It's

she didn't care, she would give him everything she had for see him, if it would be a minute or an hour or a day, but right. . . . She didn't know how long she would be able to was 'I love you, Timmie. . . . I love you, darling. . . . it's all tremble in her arms, and he said nothing and all she said He held her tight for a long time and she felt him suit and a grin. suddenly Sam gave a gasp and a shriek and she raced toward him. It was Timmie, sitting in his wheelchair, with his teddy, looking filthy dirty again, but wearing his good

Samantha had seen him wheeled, screaming, from the courtroom, and now he was hers. She reached out and pulled him onto her knees and held him, sobbing openly now and laughing and kissing him and stroking his hair and slowly he began to understand and he held her and kissed her and then in a quiet moment he touched her face with his small grimy hand and said, 'I love you, Mum.' They were words Samantha had ached to hear all her life.

The judge arrived half an hour later with the file he had collected from his office on the way, signed several papers, had Sam sign them, the matron witness them; Josh cried, Norm cried, she cried, the judge grinned, and Timmie waved his teddy bear at the judge with a broad grin and they wheeled into the elevator. 'So long!' he shouted, and when the doors closed, the judge was laughing and crying too.

41

'And then I'm going to ride Daisy . . . and play with my train and my fire engine and—'

'Take a bath,' Sam filled in for him with a grin on the drive back. My God, what a gift they had just given her. She was laughing and giggling almost hysterically, she was so happy, and for the first time since the accident that had killed Jeff and broken Mary Jo's arms and legs, Sam saw Josh laugh. They had already told Timmie about Jeff when he had asked for him, and he had cried for a minute and then nodded.

'Just like Mum . . .' But he said nothing else about her, and Sam didn't want to press him. She knew from the little that Norm had told her that it had been rough. But now that part of Timmie's life was over, and whatever he remembered in years to come would be counterbalanced

It was two weeks later, when he had finally started school and the new arrivals had been admitted and had

bringing him back to her. sleep, and touching his hair, and thanking God for her, and before she had finished it, he was snoring softly.

She stayed like that for a long time, just watching him him a story before he went to sleep in the room next to baked cookies and visited the rest of the kids, and she read between them was far from over. That afternoon they

'Thanks a lot!' But it was obvious that the love affair 'You're not smart . . . you're just my mum now!' and he groaned at what she had just said.

'Don't you want to get smart like me and Josh?' She was giggling again, and suddenly Timmie was laughing too, 'You can for a while, but then you've got to go to school. But I want to stay home with you.'

'You can just go to school like the rest of the kids.' 'You'll always be special, sweetheart. But now we can just live a regular old life. We don't have to worry about you going away, or anything. You were sitting three abreast in the middle.

and she laughed and tucked him under her arm. They 'Can't I be special again?' He looked at her hopefully 'I just decided.'

'Why?' He looked less than pleased at the thought. 'You're going to school.' 'What?' He looked excited, despite the dark circles

under his eyes. 'What?' He looked excited, despite the dark circles going to do in a few weeks.'

She told him about the new children coming in and the garden they were going to plant in the spring, and then

started to settle down, before Sam got to spend almost a full day in her office. She had worked her way through three stacks of mail, much of it from doctors, and some it from the East, which was new for her. So far they had only had referrals from western cities.

It was then, as she was putting down the last letter, that she saw him. She happened to glance out her window, and there he was, as he always had been, as tall and as lovely, with his raven-black hair and his broad shoulders and his sharply etched face, and his cowboy hat and his boots . . . only now she saw that there was a little more salt mixed in with the pepper at his temples, but if anything, it improved his looks, and she caught her breath as she watched him stop and talk to some of the kids. As she watched him she remembered how well he had played Santa. But suddenly she shrank from her office window pulled down the shade, and called her secretary to her. Her face was flushed and she looked terribly nervous, and she glanced around the room as though she might hide 'Find Josh!' was all she told her. And five minutes later he was in the room. By then, outwardly, she had regained her composure. 'Josh, I just saw Tate Jordan.'

'Where?' He looked startled. 'Are you sure?' Hell, it had been three years, he must have changed, maybe she had dreamed it.

'I'm sure. He was out in the big yard, talking to some of the kids. I want you to go find him, find out what he wants, and get rid of him. If he wants to see me, tell him I'm not here.'

'Do you think that's fair?' Josh looked at her reproachfully. 'His boy just died on the ranch, Sam. It ain't been five weeks, and he's buried out there.' He waved toward the hills. 'Don't we at least owe him some time here?'

Sam closed her eyes for an instant and then opened them to look at her old friend. 'All right, you're right. Show him Jeff's grave and then please, Josh, get him out of here. There's nothing to see. We sent him all of Jeff's things. There's no reason for him to be here.'

'Maybe he wants to see you, Sam.'

He's a nice man, Sam. We talked for a long time. He and he nodded.

'Thanks.' They looked at each other for a long moment and she cautiously opened it. 'He's gone, Sam.'

It was almost dark when Josh knocked on her front door let herself say.

nothing that seemed worth saying, nothing that she would be was back and there was nothing left to say. Or at least sudden death, with no chance to fight back. It had been like was the fact that he had left her without any real explanation and no chance to spend some time with him, maybe what he had left the wound open for so long anything at all if she had a chance to spend some time feelings? What he might say? Maybe she wouldn't feel wasn't even sure of what she was afraid of. Her own and touched him, or seen him, or talked to him, and she nearby, that if she had wanted to she could have gone out had left yet. It was so strange knowing that he was so friends, and she sat in her house alone, wondering if Tate home. When you see Timmie, tell him I'm there.' But 'Good. Has he left the barn?' Josh nodded. 'Then I'll go Sundance to go out and see the boy.'

Josh came back half an hour later. 'I let him ride buried.

Josh had just said. He had a right to see where his son was Except that she knew that there was some truth in what life now, he had no right to come back and haunt her. the ranch, to go away again, to leave her alone. It was her but she just sat there, thinking. She wanted him to leave sat in her office and waited, she didn't even know for what. She wanted to tell him to go to hell, but she didn't. She of regret on his face. 'The one you owe, Sam, is yourself.'

Josh stopped in the doorway for a moment with a look Now I don't owe him a damn thing.'

face him. 'And don't tell me about fair, dammit. It wasn't fair to walk out on me three years ago. That wasn't fair. in his eyes she grew fierce and turned her wheelchair to

'I don't want to see him.' And then as she saw the look

real torn up about the boy. He said he'd stop by and see Mary Jo tonight at the hospital and tell her he's sorry. Sam . . . ' His eyes questioned her and she shook her head. She knew what he was going to say, but instinctively she held up a hand.

'No.' And then, softly, 'Does he know . . . about me?' Did he say anything?' Josh shook his head.

'I don't think so. He didn't say anything. He asked where you were, and I said you were gone for the day. I think he understood, Sam. You don't walk out on a woman and then come back three years later. He just said to thank you. He was real touched by where we buried Jeff. He said he wanted to leave it just like that. You know,' he sighed softly and looked out at the hills, 'we talked about a lot of things . . . about life, about people . . . Caroline and Bill King . . . Life sure does change in a few years, don't it?' Josh looked sad tonight, it had done something to him to see his old friend. Sam didn't ask but he volunteered the rest of what he knew. 'When he left here, he went up to Montana. Worked on a ranch. Saved his money, and then took out a loan and bought a small spread and turned rancher. I teased him about it. He said he was doing it to have something to leave the boy. He did real good, and now Jeff is gone. He says he just sold his place last week.'

'What's he going to do now?' Sam looked suddenly nervous. What if he stayed around there, or got a job at the Bar Three?

'He's going back up there tomorrow.' Josh had seen the fear in her eyes. And then, 'I'll see him tonight, Sam, if you should change your mind.'

'I won't.'

Timmie came home then and she thanked Josh again and went in to make dinner. For some reason she didn't want to eat in the main hall, and Timmie had been with the other kids all day. But she was nervous and jumpy all evening, and that night as she lay in the dark all she could think of was Tate. Was she wrong? Should she see him? What did it matter? It was too late now and the kids in

canter slowly over the hills she knew that, and she looked now, and never would be again. And as she began to Tate Jordan had loved a woman she hadn't been for years to touch her, because none of it belonged to her anymore. to go back and see it and know that it could no longer was the time when she finally had to face it, when she had walked the huge horse slowly out into the yard and turned a few minutes later he lifted her up into the saddle. Sam to do. She asked one of the men to saddle him up, and a And now, as she looked at him, she knew what she had after Grey Devil in Colorado, she wasn't afraid of him. seemed to gear himself down to accommodate her. Even alone, she still rode him. He was a sensitive animal and he taught or led the children, she really needed a quieter like him, he wasn't Josh's kind of horse, and when she for most of the others to ride, the ranch hands didn't really sentiment than anything else. He was too highly-strung him in a long time, and she kept him now more out of she took the stallion out for a ride, but she hadn't ridden off to school with the others and she hadn't ridden breakfast in the main hall. She was relieved when he went to Timmie asked her if she felt sick when they went to In the morning she was exhausted and shaken, and name rang in her ears all night long. think of there would be Tate . . . Tate . . . his didn't have the heart to, or even to see it. All she would things. She really ought to take the place apart, but she one day she would go out there, just to retrieve Caroline's from the graves. She had promised herself for months that they buried Jeff nearby. But you couldn't see the cabin had never gone back to the cabin or the little lake, until me she'd been back on the ranch, over a year now, she e hills they had ridden, and the secret cabin. In all the m . . . the cabin he had lived in behind the orchards, ch, she wanted to go back to their old places, just to see suddenly, for the first time since she'd been back to the

at the sky and wondered if she would ever love a man again. Maybe if she faced it once and for all and let his memory go, she could let herself care for someone, maybe someone on the ranch, or a doctor she met through the children, or a lawyer like Norman, or . . . But how pale they all looked next to Tate. As she thought of him in the yard only the day before, she smiled softly, and then piece by piece she remembered the time they had shared, the times they had run over these hills, the days they had worked side by side, the respect they'd had for each other, the nights she had spent in his arms . . . And then, as the full impact of what she had felt for him began to hit her, she came over the last hill, rounded the trees, and there she saw it, the little lake and the cabin where she had come with him. She didn't want to go any closer. It was as though, for her, it were haunted. It belonged to another lifetime, to different people, but she saw it and saluted it, and then slowly she wheeled the powerful black stallion and cantered over the little knoll where they had laid Jeff to rest. She stood there for a long moment and smiled at the people they had left there, a man and a woman and a boy, all of them people she had cared about a great deal. But suddenly, as she stood there, with tears running slowly down her face, she felt Black Beauty sidestep and buck gently, he whinnied and she looked around and saw him, sitting tall and proud in the saddle as always, Tate Jordan, astride a new Appaloosa she had just bought. He had come to say good-bye to his son. For a long moment he said nothing to her, and there were tears on his cheeks too, but his eyes bored into hers and she felt her breath catch as she watched him, not sure whether to say something or simply ride away. Black Beauty was dancing gracefully around, and as she reined him in she nodded at Tate.

'Hello, Tate.'

'I wanted to see you yesterday, to thank you.' There was something infinitely gentle in his face. Gentle and yet so powerful. He would have been frightening, had he not looked so kind. But his frame was so large, his shoulders so

morning. 'I came back after she died.' She looked out at
 'I did. For a while.' She sighed softly in the early
left, Tate? So I would go back to where you thought I belonged?
 shock him. 'I thought you would.' Did you? Was that why you
 'You never went back to New York?' That seemed to
 'Why not?'
 relief.
 'But why you?' Then he didn't know. She felt a sweep of
 'I told you in my letter, it was in Caroline's will.'

'It's quite a place you put together. What made you do
 as much too intent on her face.

ap around her legs. But he hadn't seemed to notice. He
 'I want to give him time to figure out why there was a
 should get back, Tate. I have a lot to do.' She also
 been.
 : years ago, for his own reasons. It was better left as it

knew what she had to do. Besides, he had left her
 looked down at her legs, tightly strapped to the saddle,
 his name, to reach out while she had the chance, she
 But each time she wanted to say something to him, to say
 suddenly stood facing her across a chasm of three years.
 distance, not to reach out to this gentle giant who
 him. She had to fight with everything she had to keep her
 but she couldn't bear the thought of returning there with
 few minutes?' She knew that he wanted to see the cabin,
 tried to feel nothing as he did. 'Will you ride with me for a
 'Sam?' It was the first time he let the Appaloosa approach.
 in her eyes, and slowly he looked at her, with a question
 He nodded, and then he looked at her, with a question
 Sam laughed softly. 'It's been three years.'

'He did a real foolish thing. I saw Mary Jo last night.' And
 then he smiled. 'My, she's got big.'
 'He was a good boy.' He shook his head slowly then.
 'You don't have to thank me. We loved him.' Her eyes
 gently somewhere else.

He picked up Samantha and her stallion and set them
 and, his eyes so deep set. He looked as though he could

the hills as she spoke. 'I still miss her.'

His voice was soft beside her. 'So do I.' And then, 'Can we ride? Just a few minutes. I won't be back here for a long time.' He looked at her, almost pleading, and then feeling her heart pull inside her, she nodded and let him lead the way. When they rounded the knoll, they stopped as they came to the little lake. 'Do you want to get down for a minute, Sam?'

'No.' She shook her head firmly.

'I don't mean go into the cabin. I wouldn't do that.' And then he looked at her with a question. 'Are their things still there?'

'I haven't touched them.'

He nodded. 'I'd like to talk to you for a minute, Sam.' But this time she shook her head. 'There's a lot I never said.' His eyes pleaded but hers were gentle.

'You don't have to say it, Tate. It's a long time ago. It doesn't matter anymore.'

'Maybe not to you, Sam. But it does to me. I won't bore you with a long speech about it. I just want you to know one thing. I was wrong.' She looked at him, suddenly startled.

'What do you mean?'

'To leave you.' He sighed softly. 'The funny thing is that I even had a falling-out with Jeff about it. Well, not about you, about running from the ranch. He said that all my life I ran away from the important things, from the things that mattered. He said I could have been a foreman, or owned a ranch if I wanted to. He and I drifted for about six months, and then we gave each other hell. I went up to Montana then and bought that little ranch.' He smiled then. 'I made a damn good investment, too, and all with a loan. I did it to show Jeff he was wrong, and now'—he shrugged—'it really doesn't matter anymore. Except for what I learned from it. I learned that it doesn't mean a damn if you're a rancher or a ranch hand or a man or a woman, if you live right and you love well and you do good, that's all that matters. Those two'—he nodded toward the cabin—'look at them, in the end they're buried

'Because it's too late.' She spoke softly, and as she said eyes looked very green and very deep.

'Why won't you let me tell you what I'm feeling?' His eyes looked very green and very deep.

'Because I have to,' he said.

'Why?' she asked.

'I'm sorry, Tate, I can't get back,' he said.

'Insistent. I have to get back,' he said.

'I'm sorry, Tate, I can't get back,' he said.

'Insistent. I have to get back,' he said.

it he happened to glance down at her saddle with a look of despair. As he did he frowned and was about to ask her a question, but she seized the opportunity to begin to ride away.

'Sam . . . wait . . . ' And then, as he watched her ride along, suddenly he knew the answer, the piece that had been missing from the puzzle for the past two days, why she had done it, why she had come back and remarried, why it was too late . . . 'Sam.' But she would not listen. It was as though she sensed something different in his tone now, and smacking the reins against Beauty's neck, she urged him to go faster, and as he watched her again for a long moment he was sure. His heels that had been so tight in the stirrups, that had pressed the stallion's flanks three years before, felt lifeless, toes pointed down. Never would she have allowed that to happen if she'd had any control. Now he understood the strange aspect of her saddle. He'd been so busy watching her that he hadn't even seen the most important thing of all. But now he had to spur on the Appaloosa to catch her, and finally, just before the last hill before they got back to the main complex, he urged on the Appaloosa like a racehorse and reached out to the stallion's back and reined it in. 'Stop, dammit! I have something to tell you!' His green eyes bored into hers, but when she turned her blue eyes blazed.

'Let go, dammit!'

'No, now I want to know something and I want the truth or I'll knock you off that damn horse I've always hated and we'll see what happens.'

'Try it, you bastard!' Her eyes dared him and she fought him for the reins.

'And then what would happen?'

'I'd get up and walk home.' She prayed that he would believe her.

'Would you? Would you, Sam? Well then maybe we ought to try it . . . ' He made to push her gently from her seat and she forced the stallion sideways.

'Stop, damn you.'

those children. He told me, you know, Jeff did. He wrote me and what you gave my son, and what you've given to heart and your mind and your soul. I love what you gave or crawl or move. I love you. I don't care if you can't walk because of your damn legs. I tell me, you tell me, and we'll see, but not If you don't want me, I'm not going, Sam. Not this time. station that she rode. 'I was adamant, more powerful than the 'I won't.' He was adamant, more powerful than the go. For both our sakes, go. to your son and you told me what you had to tell me, now horse slowly. 'Now do me a favour. You've said good-bye difference. And believe me, this does.' She wheeled the were right. Oh, not then, but now. Some things do make a right. You're right, Tate. But the funny thing is that you But first she looked back over her shoulder. 'That's pulled the stallion's reins from him and began to walk the horse away. slowly, and then, with her own tears pouring freely, she at him, torn between despair and anger, and nodded as the tears poured slowly down his cheeks and she looked Can you? Dammit, answer me.' It was an anguished roar does, don't you, because you can't walk, can you, Sam? made a difference, now you think not being able to walk the others, aren't you? Like the children? And you're like from me again. But it's something else, isn't it? You're like just as much and you won't let me near you. Why? Is there you are again, ten times more beautiful, and I want you lousy night for the last three years, and now suddenly here never, ever, forgot you, Sam, I've dreamed of you every the people you belonged with and forget about me. But I fine, so you could go back to where you belonged with it here three years ago. But I left for your sake, not for n't you know that? I've loved you every minute since I most immeasurable pain. 'I love you, dammit, woman, earnest she had ever seen and on his face there was Why won't you tell me? Why?' His eyes were the

to me about the extraordinary woman who ran the ranch. The stupid thing is that I never understood what he was doing. I never knew that it was you. He had a lady boss here, that's all I knew. I figured some saintly crazy had started something new on Caro's ranch. But I didn't know it was you, Sam . . . and now I'm not leaving.'

'Yes, you are.' Her face was hard. 'I don't want pity. I don't want help. I don't want anything anymore, except what I have—the children and my son.' It was the first he had heard of Timmie, and he still remembered what she had said in the past about not being able to have kids.

'You can explain that one later. Now what do you want to do? Race me for the hills? The barn? The highway? I'm not leaving you, Sam.' She glared at him for a moment, and then in utter fury she urged the stallion on again, back over the hills at an insane pace the Appaloosa was barely able to keep up with, but everywhere she went, Tate was right behind. At last, with even Black Beauty winded, Sam knew she had to stop. They were at the far boundaries of the ranch now, and Sam looked at him almost in despair as she slowed to a walk.

'Trust me, babe . . . ; And then after a long moment
 feeling, and as he stood beside her he held out his arm
 away again? Tate could sense the terror that she was
 now? Or was it all an illusion, a dream? And would he trust
 him after the endless three years. Was he really back
 there for a minute, watching him, wondering if she could
 she began to unstrap her legs from the saddle. She sat
 Her eyes never left his, and then slowly, ever so slowly,
 From now on I'm going to be here with you, Sam.
 hour, every morning, every night, for the rest of your life.
 could hear, 'I want you to remember that every day, every
 I love you, Palomino.' And then in a voice that only she
 familiar words.
 only for a moment, and then she smiled as he said the
 questions, and his heart poured into hers. She hesitated
 good looking into her face. Slowly, he dismounted and
 looked at Tate. Slowly, he dismounted and
 barn door, Sam reined in the handsome stallion and
 ending not to have seen them. And when they reached
 it, but he turned and walked into the barn,
 n was waiting in the big yard when they rode slowly
 talked them over the hills and went home.
 riding their horses as close together as they could,
 red, 'Welcome home.' He took her hand then, and
 back. And when he kissed her this time, she
 as her eyes drank him in. Tate Jordan had finally
 you. I always loved you.' Her voice was filled
 caution to the winds and told him.
 . Never. His eyes held her tight, and then she
 or so long, she smiled. 'I won't ever leave you
 . ; And when she heard the words that she had
 er body close to him and tangling his fingers
 and then, without further warning, he kissed
 thought the Appaloosa right up next to her.
 'I, and there won't be,
 can't force it on someone else.
 one?' He hesitated and she smiled

'Please.' His arms never wavered as she sat there, still and tall and proud in her saddle. There was nothing defeated about Sam. Nothing crippled. Nothing broken. This was no half-woman. This was a woman and a half. But Tate Jordan was more than just a man. 'Sam?' As their eyes held and they watched each other, it was as though the years between them melted, and as Sam put her hands carefully on his shoulders, one could almost feel the bond between them begin to form again.

'Help me down.' The words were quiet and simple, and he swept her from the saddle into his arms with ease, and then, having watched what was happening, Josh appeared suddenly with her chair. Tate hesitated for only a moment and then put her in it, fearing that when his eyes met hers again he would see sorrow and pain. But when he looked into her face now, she was smiling, and deftly she began to roll away. 'Come on, Tate.' She said it matter-of-factly, and suddenly he knew that things had changed. This was no frail broken woman for him to rescue, this was a woman of strength and beauty for him to love. There was a deep smile in the green eyes as he hurried to walk along beside her.

'Where are we going, Sam?' He strode along, and she looked up into his face with a look of peace mingled with unbridled joy.

She smiled at him and rolled on, whispering the word as she looked at him once more. 'Home.'

When they reached the big house, she sped up the ramp with Tate only a few steps behind her. She pulled open the door and watched him carefully for a long moment, his eyes tender with memory as they stood there remembering another time, another life. He wanted to carry her over the threshold, but he wasn't sure she would want him to. For a last look at Sam he quietly stepped back, and then he rolled in behind him and closed the door.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Danielle Steel

THREE SISTERS, BONDED BY BLOOD,
ARATED BY FATE... COULD THEY EVER
FIND EACH OTHER AGAIN?

hen Sam Walker returned from the front lines of
ld War II, bringing with him his exquisite French
love would end in such shattering tragedy . . .

nd, at the age of nine, Hilary, the eldest of the Walk
children, clung desperately to her two sisters —

five-year-old Alexandra and baby Magan. However,
before the year was out, they too would be painfully
wrenched from her tender arms. Cut off from every
loving warmth, Hilary swore she would one day track
down the man who had destroyed her family, and find
her beloved sisters again. But could they risk everything
to confront a dark, forgotten past?

John Chapman — lawyer, prestigious private
investigator — chosen to find the sisters, embarks on a
labyrinthine trail which leads him to Paris, New York,
Boston and Connecticut, knowing that, at some time in
their lives, the three sisters must face each other and the
final, most devastating secret of all . . .

THE PROMISE

Danielle Steel

THE PROMISE IS FOREVER

For Michael and Nancy, the carefree days of innocence were drawing to an end, bringing the hardest test of their love for each other.

He was the handsome heir to the mighty Hillyard business empire.

She was just twenty-one, beautiful – and an orphan from nowhere.

That fateful day after graduation, they sealed a bond for the years to come – a vow of love that would have to prove itself in the face of terrible tragedy, doubt and despair . . .

THEY PROMISED NEVER TO SAY 'GOODBYE'

ZOYA

Danielle Steel

One woman's odyssey through a century of turmoil
St Petersburg; one famous night of violence in the
October Revolution ends the lavish life of the Romanov
court forever — shattering the dreams of young Countess
Zoya Ossupov.
Paris: under the shadow of the Great War, émigrés
struggle for survival as taxi drivers, seamstresses and
ballet dancers. Zoya flees there in poverty . . . and leaves.
in glory.
America: a glittering world of flappers, fast cars and furs
in the Roaring Twenties; a world of comfort and café
society that would come crashing down without warning.
Zoya — a true heroine of our time — emerges triumphant
from this panoramic web of history into the 80s to face
challenges and triumphs.

FULL CIRCLE

Danielle Steel

'She realized again how deeply she was falling in love with him. "Would you ever consider marriage, Tan?" He looked pensively at her and she smiled in the firelight. She looked exquisite in the soft glow, her delicate features seeming to be carved in a pale peach marble, her eyes dancing like emeralds.

"I never have before." She touched his lips with her fingertips and he kissed her hands and then her mouth.

"Do you think you could be happy with me, Tan?" "Is that a proposal, sir?" He seemed to be beating around the bush and she smiled at him. "You don't have to marry me, you know, I'm happy like this."

His hair looked even more silvery, his eyes a bright topaz blue, and she never again wanted to love any man but him. "I want more than this, Tan . . . I want you all the time . . . Will you marry me when I'm free?"

"Yes." She said the word almost breathlessly. She had never said it to anyone, but she meant it now, and suddenly she understood what people felt when they promised . . . for better or worse . . . until death do us part. She never wanted to be without him again.'

